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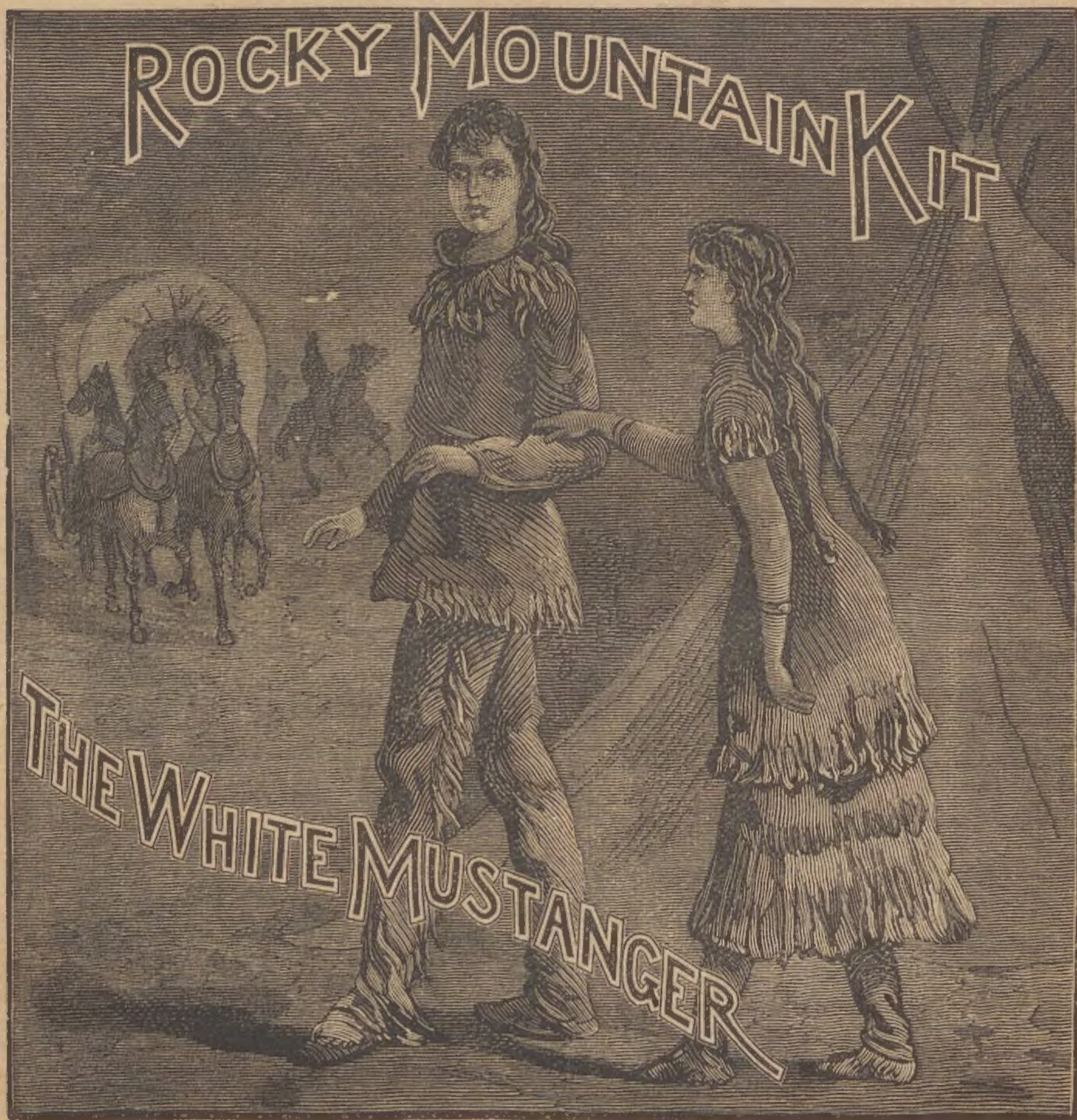
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"YOU CAN'T TRUST THEM, GIRL. GO BACK, AND GO TO SLEEP AGAIN!"

Rocky Mountain Kit;

OR,

The White Mustanger.

BY T. C. HARBAUGH,
AUTHOR OF "NICK O' THE NIGHT," "HIDDEN
LODGE," "NIGHTINGALE NAT," "DANDY
JACK," "KIT HAREFOOT," "MID-
NIGHT JACK," "OLD FROSTY,"
ETC., ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE CYCLOPEAN MUSTANGER.

A COLD November night on the banks of the tortuous Wichita.

Dense, dark clouds skurrying across the disk of a brilliant moon, and dropping snowflakes earthward in their eager journey.

A long stretch of timberless land covered with snow; a cold north wind, and a colder river rushing through the night.

Presently some strange looking animal emerges from the water, and appears upon the dreary scene. It shakes itself like a dog as it gains a firm footing, and the moon, for a moment visible, reveals a horse and his rider, alone on the river's bank.

The man is clad in buckskin; his fringed leggings are drenched, the cold blast whistles by and shakes his hair long and straight, like an Indian's.

He sits his horse, like a Comanche, born to ride, and holds a long rifle carelessly across the brass-mounted pommel of his Mexican saddle.

Tall and shaped like a Kiowa, he might have been mistaken for a warrior of that wily nation; but he was not.

He was a white man, but the climate of many Indian lands had tanned his face; he was the best trailer, the grandest fighter, the greatest scout that ever crossed the Mississippi.

For him to appear alone on the banks of the Wichita almost within rifle-shot of miles of savage wigwams was no rarity. He had ridden into Sioux camps unattended and alone, had ridden out again, but with the scalps of their greatest warriors at his belt. He rode whithersoever he pleased, now along the banks of the Cimmaron, now through the death infested passes of the Rocky Mountains.

He had faced the snows of the great West for forty years. His hair had turned from black to gray on the war-path; but he still carried the vigor of youth in his limbs, the ardor of his first trail in his heart. A keener eye was not to be found in the Indian lands of America; a deadlier rifle never rested upon a saddle.

Need I name him now?

The reader ere this has recognized that prince of pathfinders, the king of the plains, the hero of heroes—KIT CARSON!

"There's nothing here for a fellow to see!" the scout said, sending his gaze across the snowy plain that stretched ahead. "The snow has kivered up every trail, an' it's so deep that a wolf couldn't track a stinkin' Kiowa. This is

rather discouragin'. What do you say, Santa Anna?"

Kit passed his bronzed hand through the long mane of his horse as he spoke, and dashed a large quantity of water upon the snow.

The animal, recognizing the familiar voice, turned his head and looked into his master's face.

"A cold swim for nothin', eh?" said the scout. "That's what yer big eyes say," and he patted the steed's arched neck. "I'd like to see suthin' before we take to the water again. The boys hev missed us ere this; but they got used to our queer ways long ago. Not a buffler! not a Kiowa! Well, hoss, we'll turn tail upon this worthless land!"

With an inward malediction upon his fruitless reconnoissance, Kit turned toward the river.

"It's all humbug!" he said. "Taos Pedro lied—just like the rest of his greasy race."

But as the fore-feet of Santa Anna touched the rushing tide, the old pathfinder turned quickly toward the north and gathered up the reins.

"Buffler!" he cried, significantly. "No; mustangs!"

The next moment Kit Carson had returned to the place lately deserted, and his ears were filled with the well-known tread of a herd of mustangs.

"Curse it all. Thar might be a grand catch!" said the scout, glancing at the empty lasso-hook attached to his saddle. "Pepito needs a new hoss, an' I'll get 'im one, if old Level Best does her duty!"

The night air was clear and winterish, and Carson heard the rumble of the countless hoofs long before the herd greeted his eye.

"Thar's more'n two hundred!" he said. "Nobody seems to be drivin' 'em, either. A reg'lar stampede, mebbe."

Santa Anna knew what was coming as well as his master, and his long ears, stiff, but bent a little forward, told that he was ready to pit his powers against the leader of the herd.

On, on, came the galloping host; Carson sitting upright in the saddle with a cocked rifle in his hands. The lines had fallen upon Santa Anna's neck.

"By Jove!" suddenly exclaimed the famous scout, in tones of admiration. "Every one's a pictur'!" and he dropped his rifle to look at the beautiful herd sweeping forward through the moonlight that fell upon the snow.

But all at once, a startling cry fell from the old man's lips, for he saw that a rider had suddenly appeared on the leader's back.

This horse was a king of his species, graceful, swift; and as white as the snow over which he galloped.

When Carson's gaze first encountered him, he had no rider; but while the scout looked, a man came into life upon his curved back.

"Mebbe Taos Pedro didn't lie after all," old Kit murmured, looking at the strange rider. "But, there's flesh an' blood about that fellar! I'll test it to my satisfaction."

The famous rifle flew to Carson's shoulder, and he looked over the long barrel at the spirit that sat the white mustang with the airiest grace.

Several seconds passed.

"I could; but I won't! 'Twould be unfair," suddenly said the borderer. "He's got a good horse; but I've got a better one! Now, I'll see whether Taos Pedro told the truth. If he did, I'll pat his greasy back an' say; bravo! bravo!"

The rifle dropped from Carson's shoulder, and his right hand gathered up the lines. The plunging herd was now abreast of his position, but one hundred yards away. It was still sweeping toward the south.

A word to Santa Anna and a dash over the snow told how eager the horse was to try his speed against that of his bridleless brethren.

With his eye fixed upon the man on the white mustang, Carson swept over the white plain like an arrow.

"Not a whimper! We want to take him un-awares!" the scout said to his horse.

The distance between Kit and the herd could not but lessen rapidly, for his horse scarcely seemed to touch the snow as he went over it.

He bore down upon his prey like the Bedouin bears down upon the unsuspecting caravan. As he dashed along, his hat blew off; but it fell no further than his horse's back, where it danced airily at the end of a leathern cord.

"The simpleton doesn't see me," Kit ejaculated as he gained the rear of the drove. "He's dressed just as Taos Pedro described, only he's had his hair cut lately. By the Stars! no common man ever rode so grandly! But, he's a devil for all his good ridin'; I'll bet my leggin's on that."

The mustangs greeted the scout's horse with many whinnies of welcome; but Santa Anna never returned a single one. Like his master, he kept his eyes ahead of the herd.

Dashing around the flank nearest him, Kit Carson drove down the side, and all at once crossed obliquely before the gang.

The white horse and his rider were bowling over the snowy plain a hundred yards ahead, and the eager scout soon traversed this distance.

"Hold on, stranger!" shouted Kit as he leaned forward in his strong stirrups, now almost alongside of the unknown rider. "Tech yer line, an' let's get acquainted. Ye'r' a new man in these parts. What! won't ye stop? By jingo! I'll have a squint at yer face, if I don't git to exchange words."

There was no reply; the stranger kept on, with his face, shaded by a monster Mexican sombrero, turned stubbornly toward the south, and from the moon.

Kit Carson could but feel astonished, and his arm shot forward as the last words dropped from his tongue.

An instant later his hand fell heavily upon the unknown's nearest shoulder, and quick as a flash, it whirled him half-around on his saddle.

"Scuse rudeness, stranger," Kit said apologetically. "I want yer phiz squar' in the moonshine, fur then I— Great Jehosaphat! thunder an' lightnin'! death—ghost—or devil?—which?"

Kit Carson dropped back from the body he had grasped, his face as white as the November snow, his eyes staring like specters from their sockets!

His action had loosened the unknown's hat, and, falling off, a mass of hair suddenly released had dropped to the shoulders. But this was not all. It was the face that startled the old Indian-fighter.

Face? There was no face! What Carson saw was the likeness of hideousness.

From the temples to the chin there was nothing but a white plain, unrelieved save by a single eye that blazed in the center of the forehead!

I say that Carson the fearless started from this monster.

With his cry of "death—ghost—cr devil?" ringing out upon the frosty air, he released the shoulder and wheeled his steed.

"Great heavens! Old Taos Pedro told the truth for once!" gasped the scout, spurring his horse beyond the mustang lines. "Where did that creature spring from? He must belong to that terrible race of bein's that Fremont says existed thousands of years ago. No mouth! no nose! no cheeks! only a devilish eye! By the stars! he shall not live to people this land with such as him."

Carson was recovering from his fright. He had halted beyond the herd still plunging on. The demon cyclop was sitting the white mustang apparently in the manner that the scout had turned him.

He was still within rifle-shot when Kit raised his trusty weapon.

But he lowered it as suddenly as he had thrust it against his shoulder, and without a word, turned his horse's head toward the Wichita.

"Kit Carson, you're a fool!" the old fellow said, addressing himself. "Sech critters ar'n't born in this fair land; it's a freak o' nature; but the durndest one I ever heard of. A figure that's got muscle, an' shape, an' youth, an' beauty o' limb; but sech a face! By my best years! I'm goin' to know all about that terrible fellar. Kit Carson, you an' him hev got to become acquainted before you leave Kiowa land. I'm not scared now; but I didn't expect to see—*nothin'*! Ha! hyar's the Wichita."

The river, no doubt, was a welcome sight to the old scout, and once more the faithful horse, breasting the icy current, carried his master across.

Beyond the water again, Carson galloped moodily away; but his disturbed countenance told that the mustang fiend had strangely impressed him.

CHAPTER II.

PEPITO AND HIS EARS.

"Ar' thet you, Kit?"

Carson heard these words, as he descended into a basin-like little valley that seemed entirely shut off from the world above and around it.

It was several miles from the Wichita river. The middle of the basin was cast in shadow; but here and there, on the sides of the hills, lay ghostly patches of moonlight.

The questioner came forward with the last words still upon his lips.

He was a tall man, near Kit's age—then fifty-six—and was clad in the buckskin garments of the plainsman.

The rifle which he carried cocked across his arm told that he had been on guard.

The next instant the men met, and Kit leaped from his horse.

"How's the Seraph?" he asked, quickly, and with much anxiety in his rough, uncultured tone.

"Not much better. He's been fidgety an' restless ever since you went off. All at once he jumped out o' his sleep an' axed me ef I didn't hear suthin'! 'No, you little fool,' sez I; 'go to sleep an' quit dreamin'.' But he shut his eyes, and shammed sleep. Presently up he flew ag'in, an' swore that he heard a gang o' wild hosses. But Ole Experiment pulled 'im back, an' threatened to swallow 'im if he didn't keep still. Queer proceedin's, thinks I."

"What a keen ear that young 'un has!" Carson said to himself. Then he looked at the gaunt man before him.

"Did you hear anything, Simon?"

"Not even a cricket."

"But the Seraph did!"

"What?"

"Hosses."

"Honest Injun?"

"Yes."

Simon Brane looked down nonplused.

"Queer!" was all he said.

Carson smiled faintly and laid his broad hand on Simon's shoulder.

"Boys like Pepito hev wonderful ears," he said. "I allus noticed it; so don't grow jealous of the Seraph, Simon. Is he asleep, now?"

"Ef he isn't, Ole Experiment hes got his eye on him. You kin bet on that Kit. But what about the hosses?"

"Not now, Simon," Carson answered, moving away. "I want to look at the rest o' the camp, first."

Not far from the spot where the scout encountered the guard, he came to a halt. He still held the bridle-rein of the horse he had ridden across the river.

He was now in the center of the basin, and no sooner had he halted than several figures rose from the ground and stood before him. They, too, were, with one exception, men like Simon Brane.

The exception was a boy about fourteen. He was small for his age, but exquisitely molded, and very handsome. His face, in the sunlight, was not white; it had the soft, mellow tinge of the Creole. He had a pair of eyes that glistened like stars as they went through their restless dance in their sockets. His hands were small and shapely; and, on the whole he did not disgrace the name which the great Indian-fighter had bestowed upon him.

This strange youth was Pepito, or the Seraph.

He sprung agilely to Carson's side despite the quick effort of one of the men to intercept him, and the strong arm of the old guide swept protectingly around him.

"Did you hear them?" Pepito asked, looking up into Carson's face.

"Ay, saw 'em, too," was the response.

The Seraph threw a look of triumph into the faces of the men.

"How many do you think there war, boy?" asked Kit.

"About two hundred."

"Thet's good guessin'. You must hev counted 'em."

"No! Pepito could not because he did not see them. He counts by sound, sometimes."

Kit looked with a feeling not unmixed with awe upon the youth whom he regarded in the light of a phenomenon.

"An' did you see the leader o' the herd?"

"No! Pepito heard; he did not see."

"Ah!"

Carson then pushed back the long locks that clustered about the Seraph's temples, and looked at the anxious men.

"I saw some hosses," he said, "an' some o' the best ones that ever galloped over grass. An' I said to myself, 'ef we were on a hoss-trip what luck we'd hev!' But I never tried to catch one, because we didn't come to this kentry for stock."

"That's business!" ejaculated one of the rough listeners. "If we'd 'a' wanted hoss we'd hev stopped up on the Arkansaw. I'm a leetle out o' my deestrick; but a publick eddicatur hes the hull world fur a school-room. Thet's what Fremont's flower-hunter used to remark. No, sir, we don't want hoss! but we want ha'r. Ole Experiment has spent half his nat'ral life in teachin' the Injun that this existence is one o' the onsartainest things that ar'!"

Carson listened to the grotesque individual who, as Old Experiment, was known at every frontier post beyond the Mississippi. He always spoke with an earnestness that bordered on the ludicrous; and never failed to close a speech with the last sentence we have just heard him utter.

"But to come back to the present," Kit said with a smile, as Old Experiment concluded. "The snow has covered up all trails, 'ceptin', of course, the one the mustangs made. We're not far from the Injun towns. They're over yonder—jes' under the bluffs—whar they hev been for fifteen year."

"An' the scholars ar' waitin' for the teacher!" said Old Experiment. "First class in spellin' stan' up. Spell de'th an' destruction!"

"Hold on, thar!" cried Simon Brane. "You ole fool, we ain't Injuns. Don't call the class up till it's before you. Mebbe somebody else 'sides the Kiowas will git to spell death before we git back to the Arkansaw."

"Thar's a world of truth in that remark," Kit Carson said quietly. "We ought to be movin'. I'm rather anxious to get down to business. What do you say, my boy?"

But Pepito did not reply, and when the old guide raised him he burst into a laugh. The little fellow had actually fallen asleep leaning against his lover and protector.

"He'd do us a powerful sight of good ef he'd take to sleepin' all the time," said Old Experiment, tartly, with a glance at the boy. "When he is awake he goes on about a sister what nobody thinks he never hed. As for me, I never let my life work of eddicatin' the Injin interfere with other affairs. Now, while I war teachin' the Sioux—"

"We'll take the rest o' that arter awhile," broke in Simon Brane to Old Experiment's disgust. "The boy is all right. Ef I hed

them ears o' his'n— Thar! they're at work ag'in!"

The eyes of the quartette were fixed upon the Seraph who had suddenly sprung from Carson's arms, and was listening, full of excitement, with his face upturned toward the tops of the ghostly trees.

"It's coming fast!" he half whispered. "There may be more than one, Kit."

The old guide was at the boy's side.

"What is it, Pepito?"

"A wagon!"

"Thar's a specimen o' acute hearin'! A wagon in these parts! Why, the Fort Sill road ar' more'n fifty miles away!"

"That will do!" said Kit, throwing a commanding glance at Old Experiment, and the grotesque educator smothered the sentence forming on his lips.

Silence fell over the little camp; its occupants were listening intently.

Kit and his grown companions were non-plused, because they heard nothing, but the strange boy continued in the attitude of one listening.

At last Santa Anna pricked up his pointed ears.

"Thar!" cried Kit. "I told you so. The hoss confirms the Seraph. I've ridden the critter fur ten year, an' he never played Ananias once; he don't know how."

To mount and ride to the brow of the hill from whence a view of the moonlit plain above the bottom of the valley could be obtained, was but the work of a moment. Kit Carson did this, leaving his companions to follow him as quickly as they could.

Once on the upland, the unmistakable sounds of a wagon thundering along were borne to the scout's ears.

"It's a government consarn, because every top an' bolt ar' loose!" said the guide. "An' Injuns! just as I suspected."

"Injuns? First class in spellin'—"

"Yes, Injuns. They're drivin' that wagon," interrupted Carson. "They must be two miles off. This is one o' them wonderful nights thet would carry a cricket's chirp across the Wichita."

There was no reply for the party of scalp-hunters on the hill was listening to the not unmusical sounds carried to their ears by the frosty air.

Above the rumble of the wagon rose the wild shouts of the red drivers, and the crack of the teamster's whip. Carson's eyes flashed fire as he listened.

All at once the rumble ceased; but the yells continued.

"Broke down!" cried Simon Brane, looking at his leader, and at the same time snatching up the reins lying on his horse's neck.

"No, not that, Simon. They're fordin' the river, that's all. In five minutes we'll hear 'em on the old Kiowa trail."

Sure enough, before that time, the roll of the wagon was resumed, the cries, and the shot-like sounds of the whip.

"I'd like to do a bit of missionary work over thar," muttered Old Experiment, with a sigh. "Them Injuns don't realize thet this world's but a fleetin' show. They want Ole Experiment to teach 'em."

Kit did not seem to hear the garrulous fellow; he was listening to the tumult on the Kiowa trail, across the river.

"The fiends have spilled blood gettin' that wagon!" he suddenly cried. "Thar ar' four hosses, an' only four thet I know of, thet kin keep up sech licks so long. And by the best years o' Kit Carson's life, ef they tech one o' the women thet usually ride behind 'em, every blade o' grass in Kiowa land shall be red when I leave! We can't catch the wagon now; no use thinkin' about thet, boys. But we kin do suthin' else; we kin see it come into the Kiowa town!"

A moment later the old guide and his companions were crossing the valley of the camp, and, ascending to the table lands that rose above it on the south, they galloped away, the famous scalp-hunter of the Rockies well in the lead.

CHAPTER III.

KIOWA CHARLEY.

THE rumbling of the wagon and the savage yells greeted other ears besides those that first heard them in Kit Carson's camp.

Not far away stretched a long line of rude wigwams that constituted one of the largest Indian villages in the Southwest. It was distant not more than three miles from the valley camp, and the November wind blowing toward it could but carry the startling sounds down the snowy "street" before the skin-closed doors.

The Kiowa town seemed to stand in what had once been the bed of some river. There were high tree-covered banks on two sides, and on the summit of one—the one nearest the Wichita—there was much chaparral covered with snow. In the weird moonlight every lodge might have been counted by a spectator on either ridge. It was down this valley or river-bed that Custer once charged at the head of the Seventh Cavalry; but that was long after Kit Carson had left his last great trail.

It is to this spot that we now convey the reader.

The north winds, we have said, carried the yells of the wagoners into the Indian town. This was true.

The sounds, not uncommon ones in that country, did not disturb the tenants of a single wigwam. If a wakeful Indian heard, he anathematized the young bucks, and turning over, tried to forget them and the cold in sleep.

But there was one person in the Kiowa village who heard, and he, despite the biting blast, stood hatless in the snow before one of the lodges.

His face, bold and handsome, with a pair of piercing eyes, was turned toward the north. His hair was long, black and silken; it lay on his broad shoulders, after the manner of the affected frontiersman. In the moonlight one would have taken him for a half-breed, for his skin was dark; but there was not a drop of Indian blood in his veins. He was well, even fantastically, clad, and a pair of Mexican spurs at the heels of his moccasins, told of a ride just taken, or, one to come.

We guess the former.

"Curse the hot-headed fools!" fell from his mustache-hidden lips while he listened in the wind. "They carried out their resolve and

struck Fort Sill trail. Now here they come with their prize, a government wagon, and two span of Uncle Sam's mules!"

The speaker was angry, for he grated his teeth, and took two elegant revolvers from his belt.

"I'd just like to empty these daisies among those cut-throats!" he said, looking at the weapons. "I could do it, too, and nobody would dare touch me. I'm master here, just as much as Santanta and Flying Crow. I haven't killed an Indian since I corraled the twenty Snakes, and tried my hands at Indian heads at thirty paces. Hurrah! they're coming up the valley now."

The young man—for young he was—had taken a step forward as if he intended to meet the yelling red-skins, when he was startled by a touch.

"Charley!"

He turned and stood before a figure that would have reminded a romantic observer of a fairy. Small, beautiful, with eyes that gleamed like little stars, and with a hand, mellow in color, and faultless in shape, a girl stood before the youth in the snow.

"Staria! you'll freeze to death here. Go back before your bed gets cold. I'm going up to see the young red thieves come in. Curse their pictures! they've been plundering around Fort Sill. Black Mustang promised me that they would not go there. The liars! You can't trust them, girl. Go back and go to sleep again."

But the Indian queen hesitated.

"You're afraid I'll mistreat Black Mustang: isn't that it?" he said with a smile. "I'll not touch the rascally liar, although well he deserves an application of moccasin. Come, Staria, I'll take you back."

He caught the girl's arm, but she broke gently away.

"Kiowa Charley can go and see the young bucks come back!" she said. "Staria will go to the bed she left when she heard him leave his lodge."

"That's sensible: you're a good girl!" was the reply, and the mustache touched the brown beauty's cheek.

True to her word, the Kiowa maid turned away, and Kiowa Charley, as if to make up for lost time, went rapidly toward the end of the village.

The bounding wagon although still unseen, was not far away, and just beyond the last lodge that stood at the northern end of the town, the young man took up his station.

He stood in the shadow of this terminal wigwam, his pistols back in his belt again, but cocked, and his splendid figure thrown back as if for a spring.

The moon, now at its full, was flooding the snow with silvery light.

All at once the returning party greeted Kiowa Charley's eager eyes.

"Here they come—the skunks!" he flashed. "Heaven knows how much blood that wagon has cost. Sheridan will think I have broken my pledge when he hears of this. I pledged myself for the Kiowas' good behavior for one year, and here, scarcely three months afterward, the

greasy villains make me out a liar. By Jove! they'll have to restore that wagon intact. I'll make them take it back to Fort Sill if I have to drive them every mile at the muzzle of the revolver."

Kiowa Charley fairly trembled with the indignation he could not suppress.

Another moment and the foremost animals were almost abreast of his position.

He could have seen the twenty young Kiowas who flanked and followed the team, but he did not.

"Great heavens, it is the old major's family wagon!" fell from the watcher's lips. "Every Indian ought to be shot from his horse."

Then a figure sped from the shadow of the last wigwam, and the next moment Kiowa Charley was upon the lead horses—his moccasined feet planted firmly upon their backs!

He did not shout to the fatigued horses; he stooped, seized the strong leathern lines, and rising quickly, jerked them back. The effect was startling.

The leaders, forced upon their haunches, collided with the rear span, and the heavy wagon thundering up against these in turn, formed a confused heap.

But Kiowa Charley had carried his point—he had stopped the team!

And that almost before the thunderstruck Indians could recognize him!

"That's the way to stop a team!" he said, proud of his feat, as he whirled upon the young bloods. "Now not one word out of your mischief-making mouths. You couldn't come back decently and in order, if you did go away in that manner; but you must play highwaymen and get the United States army after you. Hold on there! not an Indian is to leave till I'm through with him."

The shamefaced bucks stopped; they saw the glitter of the pistols clutched in Kiowa Charley's hands.

"You have stolen the team of no ordinary man. This isn't Whisky John's wagon; you didn't find a gill of the accursed stuff in this vehicle. Tell me where the guard is. Just as I expected: you killed somebody to get the team."

Guilt and shame were visible in the looks of the young braves. They moved uneasily on their steeds before the deadly pistols.

"Where is Black Mustang?"

"In there!" was the reply and the dark hand of the speaker pointed into the wagon.

"Done for, eh?" ejaculated Kiowa Charley, and bounding agilely over the backs of the hindmost horses, he looked into the wagon.

The canvas cover, used to shelter travelers from storm and sun, had been stripped off; the bows stood bare.

At the bottom of the bed a stalwart Indian lay on his back. His very position told the spectator in a moment that he was dead. The ghastly spot, darker than the skin, on his forehead, told the story of somebody's unerring aim.

"Dosed with a Minnie!" said Charley, turning away with a single look.

"Woman kill Black Mustang!" said the Indian who before had spoken.

"A woman—Major Lincoln's wife? Miscreants!—brutes! What have you done with her?"

The yellow Kiowa had wheeled upon the mounted group, and the heavy revolvers pointed straight at their half-exposed bosoms.

"Speak! You haven't lost your tongues if you have lost manhood. Open your mouths! quick! now! or by the spirits of Kiowa land I'll unseat you all by death. Where is Mrs. Lincoln?"

Fear opened the mouths of the almost pale Kiowas. They saw the deathly gleam in Kiowa Charley's eyes; they noted the fingers that touched the easy triggers.

"Squaw wasn't in the wagon. She at big fort. It was the girl that shot Black Mustang."

"Bessie Lincoln? So much the worse, devils! And you have killed her?"

"No! girl get caught, we tie her and put her in wagon. In there now somewhere!"

"In that wagon? Its only occupant is Black Mustang, dead as he should be?"

The Indian looked astonished.

Kiowa Charley saw that they were not deceiving him.

By one bound he landed in the vehicle.

"There's a broken board in the floor."

"Hole?" sententiously asked the Indian.

"Yes."

"Girl fall out, then."

Charley gritted his teeth till they cracked.

"I ought to kill every fiend of them," he hissed. "But that would do no good."

Then he looked at the young bucks again.

"When did you see the young girl last?"

"Two—five—ten mile back."

"That's definite, but it's Kiowa correctness."

He was once more upon the backs of the lead horses.

"I want you Indians to take care of this team till I come back. If you fail to do it, I'll see to it that this village has more funerals in one day than it ever had. I mean business, and the kind that kills, too. You'll see Hancock or Sheridan here before the snow leaves, and all for your villainous work. By heavens! if you've harmed a hair of Bessie Lincoln's head, Kiowa Charley will do some of the tallest shooting ever seen on the plains. She isn't my sweetheart, that I take it so hard. I'm an outlaw, no better than you dogs in some respects, but woman's woman the world over, and you touch a white one to stir the blood of Charley, the Kiowa."

He was on the ground when the last word fell from his lips.

"Whirling Hawk, come with me," he said to a young Indian. "Now," to the rest, "take the team away. Injure it in any way, and I'll kill!"

He flew down the line of lodges before the Indian addressed as Whirling Hawk could disengage himself from his companions.

A few bounds brought him to a large structure that looked like a shed. But it was covered with heavy bark and skins from the tip of the roof to the ground.

There was great impatience in the sweep of his hands as he tore the curtains aside.

"Midnight?"

A whinny came from the darkness within, and the next moment a splendid black mustang, large, strong, and formed for fight, sprung into the moonlight.

Another whinny beyond the threshold of the Indian stable told that it was still inhabited.

"Stay there, Morning! I've got my horse," said the Kiowa King, and, as the curtain door shut, he swung his supple body upon the back of the black.

"Now, Hawk!" he said to the Kiowa who had come up. "We're going to find the girl. You drove down the old trail?"

Whirling Hawk nodded.

"Then away we go!"

The mustang shot forward with a great bound, and a stout hair bridle which Kiowa Charley drew from his bosom was adjusted before ten rods had been traversed.

The twain soon left the wagon and its obedient drivers far behind, and as the last lodge was gained, a cry that seemed to come down from the chaparral on the ridge above the village, made Charley turn his head.

But he did not tighten the rein gripped loosely in his hand. He merely cast a glance over his shoulder and said:

"When I come back!"

What did he mean?

CHAPTER IV.

SHOT IN THE EYE.

THE young bucks did not breathe freely until they saw Kiowa Charley and his red companion flying from the village. They seemed rejoiced to be relieved from the flash of his keen eyes and the menace of his formidable revolvers.

Although his threat to kill, if he found not the team intact on his return, had been made with a smile, it had a certain effect. A few of the Kiowas conducted the team to the great square of the village, and sullenly prepared to guard it till his return.

By this time a goodly portion of the Indian town was aroused.

The Kiowas came pouring from their lodges to learn the cause of the rattle of chains and wheels at that hour, so near their rude domiciles.

The guard was soon surrounded and plied with questions. But they were so cautious as a witness with their replies. They knew they had broken faith, not only with Kiowa Charley, but with their head chief, Santanta.

While the nation was hostile to the Government, the command had gone forth that the Fort Sill trail should not be molested. Santanta did not want to encounter such Indian-fighters as Hancock and Sheridan.

After Charley's departure in search of Bessie Lincoln, the young bucks had agreed that the truth about their raid and its results should be concealed as long as possible. Therefore, before reaching the square, they removed the rigid body of Black Mustang, and concealed it, as they thought, without having been seen, in a lodge belonging to one of their number.

Thus when they halted the team in the square, they were prepared for the interrogatives that poured in upon them.

"They're keepin' suthin' back. I kin read on their painted faces that they are stringin' lies just as fast as their tongues kin go. The idee thet they found thet team runnin' loose up by the North Fork is too thin to take! I'll bet my claims on the old Comstock thet they struck the Sill trail somewhar. They're lyin' to keep old Santanta off 'em. Wal, the chief ain't hyar, lucky fur their hides. But whar's Kiowa Charley?"

The speaker, a tall and powerfully built man, stood apart from the main crowd in the square with his giant hands resting upon his hips. He was a white man; but his face was dark. He was dressed in a jacket of greasy buckskin; and pantaloons of the same material were thrust into a pair of dingy boots. A leathern belt at his waist contained a pair of heavy pistols, one at each side, while upon one hip rested a knife whose enormous sheath indicated the dimensions of the hidden blade.

Beneath the slouch hat crushed upon the head of this worthy, glittered a pair of eyes full of cruelty and hate. There was much of money cunning about them; they seemed to dance with evil desire when the name of the young outlaw fell from his lips.

"He can't be at home with all this racket in the town!" continued the giant. "If he is, he must be with the girl. First, I'll go an' see, an' then I'll get at the bottom of this Injun lyin'."

Turning away, the speaker went down the thoroughfare of Indianland.

The whole Kiowa land knew this man.

Quartz Dick was a person who was not to be fooled with.

His life had been full of thrilling adventures. He had carried it on a trigger through twenty mining-districts; had been hung by Vigilantes in Texas, and shot by Sitting Bull in the North. His great fists, brown and hard, looked like lumps of quartz; hence his name—Quartz Dick.

He killed wherever he went. Quick with the pistol, vindictive, and a man of few words, his quarrels always resulted in death. He always shot his man through the right eye!

His walk, when he was in a hurry, was a strange swagger, and such it was as just before dawn he pushed through the Kiowa village.

"Mebbe she's up on the squar'," he said to himself, halting suddenly.

He stood before a lodge in the snow, before which, if he had looked he would have seen a foot-track that would have done credit to a fairy.

But Quartz Dick was not hunting footprints in the snow. He wanted their maker.

Laying his tawny hand on the curtains he parted them and looked in.

Darkness greeted him—darkness and silence.

"Little one!" he called in a low tone.

There was no reply.

"Jest what I expected!" he said. "I was a fool to think thet she'd be hyar when there war such a kickin' up in the town. It is settled thet she ain't at home. I'm not so partic'lar carin' about her jest now, only I like to know what Kiowa's up to. The boy's gainin' a wonderful 'scendency ov late, an' I'll hev to doctor his eye, I will!"

Satisfied that the lodge was untenanted, Quartz Dick moved away.

"By my bloody knife! thar's Little Buck. Now I'll get at the gospel part of this hoss an wagon business."

In turning from the lodge he had whirled upon a person who seemed to have been watching his movements. That individual was a young Indian, and he did not stand more than ten feet from the giant.

An agile spring landed Quartz Dick before the Kiowa.

"Hello! Little Buck!" ejaculated Dick. "Tak-in' a walk in the 'arly mornin', eh? Thet war a good wagon you brought in. Did ye hev any trouble gettin' it?"

The young savage did not reply, but gave his harsh interlocutor a look of well-feigned amazement.

"It looks like a private vehicle," continued Quartz Dick; "belongs to some officer, I s'pose. Did any ov you get hurt in the tussle?"

Then Little Buck opened his mouth.

"Little Buck just got up," he said. "Heard wagon go by; an' just goin' down to big place to see."

A strange smile flitted across Dick's bronze face.

"You've all 'tended the same lyin' school," he said. "Now, Little Buck, I want you to desart yer principles fur jest one moment an' come down to solid facts. How did you get thet team?"

Struck full in the face as by a fist with the question, the Kiowa staggered back.

Quartz Dick followed him, his right hand resting in a decidedly threatening manner upon his hip.

Little Buck thought of the oath taken by himself as well as the rest of his companions.

"You've got a purty eye, Injun!" said Dick, altering his tone as he fixed his flashing orbs full in the Kiowa's organ of vision. "'Twould be a pity to spoil it. Jest think how you'd like to knock at the door of the big lodge over thar, with only one eye. Jest consider it fur a minute."

There was no mistaking the murderous threat illy concealed by the bully's words.

Brave as the young Kiowa was, it almost paled his cheek.

"You don't want to go thet way, I see, so I set you down fur a sensible Injun. Now, how did you get the wagon?"

Quartz Dick stood before the young buck in a seemingly careless attitude. Both arms were now akimbo; but his right hand touched the butt of one of the pistols.

Little Buck's eye was in danger.

Therefore, he did what any sensible Indian in his situation would have done. He told the story of the capture of the team.

The evil eyes of Quartz Dick dilated when he heard the novel but striking description of Bessie Lincoln's beauty as it fell from the Indian's lips.

"But whar is she now?" he asked, eagerly.

"Lost."

"Lost? How?"

"Fell out wagon."

"Tied?"

"Yes."

"Curse yer greasy skins, she's lyin' somewhere on the snow at the mercy of the wolf!"

"Kiowa Charley find 'er, mebbe."

"Oh, he's gone to hunt her?"

"Him an' Whirling Hawk."

Quartz Dick did not reply.

"Another gal's come on the scene," he said to himself. "She must be purtier nor the little one. The young blood will go to her. So will I, ha! ha! We'll have to have a tussle for this lost angel, an' somebody 'll hev to get shot in the eye. From what Little Buck says about her, she's purty enough to be Major Lincoln's gal—that old red-taped salve thet giv' me two hours to leave Arizona two years ago. I remember now that he had a little gal with 'im at the fort."

These thoughts made Quartz Dick's eyes sparkle.

"Whar do you think you dropped her?" he said suddenly to the Kiowa.

"Don't know, but not far back."

"Charley will find 'er. He's gone after her for me!"

The last sentence made Little Buck open his eyes.

"Now, nothin' about this, Injun!" admonished the bully. "I'll keep yer secret from Santanta."

The young Kiowa, glad to be released, went off breathing freely once more. He put his finger to his right eye, to assure himself that it still performed its functions.

As for Quartz Dick, he moved rapidly toward the northern confines of the village.

"I'll see which hoss he took," he said, stopping suddenly in front of Kiowa Charley's stable.

Opening the door, he called:

"Morning, my boy?"

A responsive whicker rewarded him.

"Good! He's got the fastest horse," he said, turning away. "He'll be back soon. Ought to be comin' now."

Just beyond the last lodge, in the identical spot where Kiowa Charley had waited for the wagon thieves, stood the burly figure of Quartz Dick, listening for the sound of hoofs.

It was now the darkest hour that precedes the dawn; and a half-naked figure was creeping from lodge to lodge upon the white man.

When it rose, two revolvers covered the bully's figure.

"Dick!"

The giant turned. Something leaped from his belt. There was a report—a fall!

Shot in the eye!

CHAPTER V.

HOOF AGAINST HOOF.

"THAT'S the way to settle 'em!" muttered Quartz Dick, turning composedly from his victim, now staining the snow with his blood, but lying quiet and motionless, like a corpse. "I'm the best eye-doctor in this kentry. Now, I'd like to see Kiowa and this new beauty what he's to bring hyar fur my 'special benefit. I can't see anything," stooping and looking anxiously over the snow, "an' bless me! ef I kin hear a hoof."

The bully of Kiowa land began to grow impatient, and at last, as the first long arrows of dawn shot over the eastern horizon, he turned from his fruitless vigil with a wild, mad oath.

"He's gone further nor he expected," he said, consolingly. "Mebbe he found the gal, and kept right on—no! he wouldn't do that; Charley'd bring her right hyar—for me!"

Quartz Dick, in moving away, came upon his victim. The body was cold and rigid. Only one eye stared at him.

"You feared Quartz Dick would tell Santanta, eh?" said the ruffian, looking at the corpse. "An' so you came back to stop his tongue. Poor Injun fool! The man what fools with me goes up yonder, with one eye in a very unrepresentable condishun. An' what makes it the more provokin', it's always the eye they shoot with!"

The body of the unfortunate Little Buck had fallen behind a lodge.

Quartz Dick drew his knife and cut a long gash in the yielding texture of the wigwam, into which he thrust the corpse.

"It's the old fever lodge," he said to himself. "Nobody ever looks into it. There isn't a Kiowa in the land what would poke his head inside for a bar'l ov whisky."

His victim disposed of, the bully moved away, confident that no one had witnessed the deed.

But on a spot where he would have looked last for witnesses three pair of eyes had seen everything.

But let us return to one of the most important characters of our romance.

Kit Carson had a certain admiration for Kiowa Charley, and despite good reason he cheered that worthy as he and Whirling Hawk left the Indian town to find Bessie Lincoln.

It was this cheer, choked off before half finished, that caused the young man to look over his shoulder at the chaparraled ridge and murmur, "When I come back."

"That's the second time I've been a fool!" the old guide said, looking at his companions who were staring amazedly into his weather-beaten face. "The other time war when I cheered Cheyenne Simon when he whipped the Pawnee chiefs. The consequence then war thet I got took, an' came nigh losin' my h'ar. Now my enthusiasm hes got the better ov me ag'in. I'll hev to watch myself. Kit Carson's gettin' old, boys; but he's young for all that, in some matters."

Looking upon the valley below, the old scout saw Kiowa Charley and his companion pushing toward the North.

The two horses seemed to fly over the light snow.

"Yes, yes! the gal—the major's pet! that's who they're after!" suddenly cried Kit.

The next moment he stood beside his own fleet horse.

"Stay hyarbouts till I come back!" he said to his comrades. "That precious couple down thar sha'n't touch the major's angel ef Santa Anna an' old Kit hevn't forgot their cunnin'."

He was in the saddle now, and before Old Experiment could reply, and hold him back by some of his quaint observations, Santa Anna

was dashing through the chaparral as if he knew the mission of his master.

A short gallop took Kit Carson to the level country below, and with a quick, upward glance as if bidding his companions adieu, he tightened the strong buckskin girth.

"Thar's the sweetest gal on 'arth at the end of the race!" he said to Santa Anna. "The country's level an' no chuck-holes. We've got to save 'er, for she's the major's little one—old Major Lincoln what offered three hundred in gold for you, horse."

Bounding over the plain in the road lately made by the stolen wagon and its drivers, Kit Carson's horse hardly seemed to touch the snow.

It was now near dawn. Kiowa Charley and his companion had disappeared; but Kit knew that they would keep in the road.

The eagerness of the white Kiowa to reach the girl somewhere abandoned to the wild denizens of the plain almost exceeded Carson's.

Upon the back of a magnificent black horse appropriately named Midnight, he went over the ground like an arrow.

Whirling Hawk kept up as he could, but the black, fresh and eager, soon left him behind.

"Thar they ar'!" burst from Carson's throat as gaining the top of a little rise he saw two moving objects far ahead.

As yet his pursuit was not noticed.

What would the twain do when he was discovered?

There were two against him. He did not want to take life at that time. Before starting he had vowed to himself that he would not shed Kiowa Charley's blood. As for the Indian—a Kiowa's life was of no importance!

The Rocky Mountain guide did not seem to notice the odds against him as he bowled over the plain with his rifle—Level Best—in its accustomed place, and his keen eyes fixed upon the dark specks ahead.

He saw day break, and distinguished Kiowa Charley from his scarlet companion.

All at once the Kiowa sprang erect upon the back of his lusty mustang, and shading his eyes looked far ahead.

Kit's eyes sparkled.

To shoot an Indian in that position was to send him into the air in a royal somerset, while his horse passed under him!

But even if the old guide wished to perform that feat, the distance was too great.

Carson had removed his hat long before, and it was hidden in the bosom of his hunting-jacket.

"They're gettin' anxious!" he exclaimed. "Charley thinks they've gone far enough. So do I."

Old Kit now drew a small dirt-discolored bag from the place where he had deposited his hat. Diving into the recesses of this, he produced some soft pigment which he hastily rubbed over his face. Then his hands were served in like manner, and when the unused paint returned to the little sack, Kit Carson looked like a veritable Indian hunter. His hair, long and straight, had been further Indian-fied by a brief application of his hands. There were even rings in his ears.

"I've played Indian from the Yellowstone to

the Rio Pecos, but this is the first time I've tried the Kiowa game," he said with a light chuckle looking ahead.

He saw that while Whirling Hawk stood erect on his horse, Kiowa Charley had slackened his gait. But Santa Anna had kept on without cessation, thereby gaining time and ground.

"The gal! the gal!"

These words fell startlingly from Kit Carson's lips.

He did not see the subject of his long ride; but he knew that she was near.

Whirling Hawk, the Kiowa, erect on his horse once more, was pointing ahead, and Kiowa Charley standing beside him, but on his own magnificent steed was looking eagerly forward!

"Now strain ev'ry nerve, old feller!" Carson said to his horse, stroking the heated neck. "Bessie Lincoln is the prize—Bessie the beauty ov the plains!"

Santa Anna seemed to gain new mettle at Carson's command.

"Thar! they've looked back for the first time!"

This was true.

The distance between the guide and Kiowa Charley and Whirling Hawk was less than a mile; he thought he could distinguish the puzzled expression on their faces.

Was he really an Indian to them?

"Who is he, Hawk?" the white Kiowa asked as his scarlet guide came riding up to where he had partially halted.

"Look like Indian, ride like Indian; but—"

"Go on!"

"Horse looks like—"

"Old Kit Carson's! I know it! We saw him last summer on the Arkansas. He wants the girl—Bessie Lincoln. Are you afraid of him, Hawk?"

"What should frighten a Kiowa?"

"True! answered Kiowa Charley with a sneer. "I leave you to circumvent him. I see the girl plainly now, and she sees us. You've got the King of the Plains to deal with. He used to dandle me on his knee—old Kit Carson did. Unhorse him if you can, Hawk; but if you must—kill him! yes, kill him!"

Kiowa Charley set his teeth madly behind the last word.

The young Indian nodded, with flashing eyes.

"Mind you, Hawk, he's up to every Indian trick on earth. But circumvent him if you can!"

The speaker turned his head away.

A figure cast in silhouette against the snow far away retained his gaze. A pair of arms were waving over the head of the figure; there was something like a flag in one of the hands.

Kiowa Charley bore down upon this object—known now to him as Bessie Lincoln.

Leaving Whirling Hawk to take care of Kit Carson, he did not look behind any more.

Meanwhile the Hawk started on again at slackened speed; but he no longer sat upright, a target for the long-range unerring rifle which Carson had carried for thirty years. He had fallen to his horse's side with one leg thrown over the neck, and one hand—his left—gripped

about the girth. The Indian's eyes were fixed upon the scout's horse, his rifle lying along his own steed's side, ready to finish the most eventful career of the plains.

For Whirling Hawk had no intention of sparing Kit Carson. He longed to send a bullet crashing through his brain!

But the famous guide was not to be seen—not even by the keen eyes of the Kiowa.

A casual observer would have thought that Santa Anna was riderless; but the Hawk knew that he carried his master still.

Kit Carson could ride *a la* Apache, as well as *a la* equestrian.

Whirling Hawk bit his lip in vexation.

Was Carson watching for a glimpse of his tufted head?

All at once a puff of smoke parted Santa Anna's flowing mane, and something very like a man fell from the Indian's horse!

"The Hawk could not restrain himself; he had to shoot," Kiowa Charley said.

Impelled by curiosity he looked back.

To his right a horse was careering wildly over the plains, while another—as black as the tireless animal he bestrode—was descending upon him with the velocity of a bomb!

"Great heavens!" gasped the young white Kiowa, "Kit Carson did the shooting—not the Hawk. Ah! he's got his eyes on the girl. He don't seem to see me! But let him get her—if he can!"

Kiowa Charley turned and drove the spurs madly into Midnight's rowels. The fair girl now plainly visible had stopped waving her hands. She stood in the midst of the snow, white, prayerful, full of fear.

Old Kit once more *in position*, was riding like a tornado; Kiowa Charley not a whit slower!

It was now a test of speed between two of the best horses on the plains—Midnight and Santa Anna.

CHAPTER VI.

WON BY A SCRATCH.

THE scene presented to the gaze of the terrified young girl, speechless and white faced in the open plain must have been thrilling, notwithstanding the peril that attended it.

The exciting events that were crowded in the last twenty-four hours were still present with her.

The attack of the young Kiowas upon the guard of the wagon conveying her from Wichita Agency to Fort Sill; the heroic struggle of the soldiers, their tragic death, her own stubborn defense, her capture, her unwilling ride toward the Kiowa village, and her unexpected fall from the vehicle—all these events had happened in a very short space of time.

She had fallen bound from the wagon, and had barely escaped being trampled to death by the horses that followed. To her the cold was intense; the strong north wind found every part of her frame.

Fortunately the ligatures about her ankles yielded with little effort, and at last her hands became free.

Flight was her first thought. She started

back over the plain trail that stretched before her in the moonlight. On, on she went, resolutely facing the piercing blast, praying for safety.

Bessie Lincoln kept on until her limbs refused further effort. Fort Sill was many miles away; when she reflected she knew that daylight would find her on the plains with no welcome arms in sight.

It was with the first appearance of light that the tread of horses fell upon her ears.

Then she saw three dark specks darting along the far-off horizon, and watched them with great eagerness.

Nearer and nearer they came, until with a cry of joy, she saw a white man on the foremost horse.

But her pleasure was of brief duration.

Two Indians seemed to be following, or accompanying the white.

Doubt, joy, distrust, hope, rose alternately in Bessie's mind.

She saw the head Indian drop—suddenly from his steed; then she heard the report of the deadly rifle.

"Those men are not friends!" broke from her lips as Kit Carson kept on with his eagle eye fixed apparently upon Kiowa Charley. "The Indian is trying to outwind the white man. He is as anxious to capture me as the other. Heaven help me into whatever hands I fall!"

She no longer, as we have said, waved her hands above her head, for the purpose of attracting attention.

On the contrary, they were clasped before her, and her pale face told how uncertain were her hopes at that hour.

There was something magnificent in the dashing race of the two handsome horses; their powers were strained to the utmost, and their riders, breathless but ready for anything, even death, sat them with supple grace.

"He is strange to me, but he does not look a fiend!" Bessie said, her large black eyes fixed upon Kiowa Charley who, speeding forward like an arrow, seemed to see only her. "The other is an Indian. I think I can see death in his eyes. I had better trust the young white man!"

So she centered all her hopes in the white Kiowa.

Charley did not look back after his discovery of Whirling Hawk's riderless horse.

The thunder of hoofs a few rods behind told him that Kit Carson was speeding on.

"If he passes me I'll do it! He sha'n't lay hands on the girl; 'twould spoil a romance. Already he's killed the best *young* Indian in the country. I don't want to touch him, for I might call him my godfather; but if he passes me—*this!*"

Kiowa Charley had drawn a knife, whose beautiful long blade fairly glistened in the first fresh light of day.

If Carson gained the race, even if he attempted to pass him, his young arm would drive the knife into his heart!

The two grand horses seemed equally matched. Each seemed indisposed to yield an inch to the other.

But the one ridden by the old mountaineer

had won too many races where life and death awaited him at the goal to fail now.

His rowels were not bleeding like those of Midnight. He was guided by the determined lips, close to his foxlike ears.

Suddenly Santa Anna veered to the right, and then made an oblique dash for the prize.

Kiowa Charley saw Kit's intention.

"That will not gain you anything, Kit!" he hissed.

Carson did not reply. He seemed to be calculating the distance between the white Kiowa and Bessie Lincoln.

"I see through the Indian's plans!" exclaimed the girl. "He is going to ride before the white man and reach me first. Heaven helping me, I will baffle him in this."

She sprung forward with her eyes fixed upon Kiowa Charley; but at that very moment Santa Anna with a mighty bound shot before Midnight, grazing his extended nostrils with his foam-flecked flanks!

Seeing what was coming, the young outlaw leaned forward and struck with the long-bladed knife.

Carson felt a sharp pain in his left arm—that was all.

The next instant his body shot off to the right as if descending to the ground, and his painted hand darted forward at the young girl shrinking from the capture with a cry!

But Mountain Kit was too quick for her.

She found herself lifted from the snow, while her cry of terror still lingered on her lips, and then came the sensation of being borne forward as if on the wings of the wind.

She was in the Indian's arms! Another moment and she would have been rescued by the young Apollo of the plains.

"Never mind! keep still, my little one. Major Lincoln never had a better friend nor Old Kit Carson."

With wondering eyes the startled girl looked up into the face above.

That man Kit Carson the king of the Rockies; the prince of the pathless plains?

"Kit!—Kit Carson!" she cried, bewildered.

"I'm Kit an' no mistake. The old hoss never lost a race yet; he's the high stepper of the plains; he's lightnin' greased with b'ar's oil when he gets down to work. Now we'll go back an' hev a confab with the young blood. Thar's grit in the youngster."

Going back to the man who must be Carson's enemy? Kit interpreted Bessie's glance.

"Yes, I guess he don't like me. As he giv me the knife jest ez I passed 'im, he said: 'This for Pawnee Fork, Kit.' So it seems thet he war thar!"

As he spoke, Carson wheeled and looked for Kiowa Charley.

Not far away, halted in the open plain, that worthy sat on his splendid horse, his long locks waving in the cold wind, and his faultless figure showing to splendid advantage.

His face was as white as the snow beneath Midnight's hoofs, and he was biting his ice-adorned mustache over his defeat.

His eyes glistened as Carson approached.

"Hello! pardner!" called Kit, in his rough, good-natured voice, "You've got the next best

hoss in this kentry. Thar's bottom in the crittur. Don't want to trade?"

The ludicrous sarcasm noticeable in the old mountaineer's tone drew a smile to Kiowa Charley's lips, despite his efforts to keep it back. But he did not reply.

"Ye're the youngest, the best lookin', the best eddicated; I'm an old man who's been carryin' his life on the trigger for forty years; but the girl's satisfied with me. She prefers Fort Sill to the Kiowa towns. Do you blame her for that?"

"No!" came over the snow on the wind.

"Thet's sensible. Good-by, Kiowa. Mebbe we'll meet ag'in—"

"We will!"

"Gittin' mad, eh?"

There was no answer.

"By the gods! we will meet again!" grated Kiowa Charley. "Kit Carson, you're not out of Kiowa land; Bessie Lincoln, you're far from the arms of your father. By George! your beauty outshines the dew of the prairies. Old Kit is the king of frontiersmen; but he never ran against me in my element. I'll show him what I can do. Good-by, my beauty! Kiowa Charley says farewell only over rifle and revolvers."

Kit Carson was turning away as the young outlaw finished.

With a merry twinkle in his keen gray eyes he waived his painted hand in mock parting at the rider of Midnight.

"The young chap's plannin' anew," he said, with a glance at the soldier's daughter. "I guess I'll hev to stay hyarabouts an' giv' him employment. I've got friends, Bessie, even in this kentry. Old Kit Carson knows more people west o' the Mississipp' than any other man livin'. Besides, I didn't come hyar alone. Thar's Simon an' Old Experiment, an'—by gunlocks! I want you to get acquainted with the Seraph!"

Bessie Lincoln gave the old guide a look of inquiry mixed with deep mystification.

Perhaps she was wondering what kind of a character could bear the name of the Seraph in that wild land.

CHAPTER VII.

JEALOUSY IN KIOWA LAND.

"He's a thunderin' while gettin' back. P'raps he kept right on after findin' the beauty!"

Quartz Dick stopped in his impatient strides as if the thought were worthy of more than a passing consideration.

It was broad daylight now. Not only that, but the brilliant beams darting over the eastern horizon heralded the coming of the god of day.

The bully of Kiowa land had grown tired of waiting at the last lodge for Kiowa Charley.

"No! he wouldn't keep on with the girl; I know he wouldn't. He'd bring her back hyar. Thar's nothin' to prevent that—not even the little Gold Girl. By hokey! couldn't I raise a rumpus by goin' and tellin the half Spanish chit that Kiowa had thrown off on her, an' taken up with a stranger? How her little black eyes would flash! Mebbe she'd stick me fur impartin' the information. It's a leetle knife she carries, but it kills all the same."

The sun came up to make the snow glisten like a carpet of pearls.

The Indians had deserted the wagon. It stood tenantless and alone at one side of the square. The horses had been put among the herd of mustangs belonging to the village. In the great lodge that crowned the middle of the square Black Mustang lay in the rigidity of death. A buffalo-robe was his shroud.

The young bucks, as well as Quartz Dick, awaited the return of Kiowa Charley. His last words—his mad threat—still rung in their ears.

They regretted that they had confessed to him; but who will not confess a misdeed when two revolvers stare him in the face?

"Let Buffalo Bull and his brothers come to Black Knife's lodge. There we will mark out the length of Kiowa Charley's life trail."

The speaker, an athletic young Kiowa, marched at the head of the group to a wigwam which he called his own.

"Now, how long shall it be?" he cried, turning upon his companion, in whose eyes the fires of madness were fiercely burning. "Santanta will come before two more sunsets. He will see the blue-coat's wagon and horses and he will say: 'Who took them?' Then Kiowa Charley will tell on the young bucks, and Santanta will hand them over to the soldiers. A dead man cannot talk. If the mustang chief was dead we could tell Santanta that we took the wagon from the Apaches; we could say that they killed the blue-coats and the white girl—that the bullet of Arrow Wound is in Black Mustang's head. What do my brothers say?"

"Black Knife talks well. We could say all this if the mustang chief was dead," was the reply.

"Then he must die."

"By the knives of the bucks!"

This sentence fell in unison from the lips of five determined young braves. They meant what they said; they drew their scalping-knives and crossing them in mid-air swore to seal the lips of Kiowa Charley by the application of cold steel.

They feared the anger of the all-powerful Santanta.

The cabal formed—the length of the young mustanger's life decided upon by the merciless assassin—the six quietly withdrew.

They never thought that their scheme had been overheard. While they discussed it with the coolness of old murderers the occupant of the neighboring lodge was leaning against the buffalo-skin wall eagerly drinking in every word. Her face was almost white with suppressed anger—her eyes dilated, scintillated like stars.

She was beautiful, with a fairy figure, mellow skin, and a mass of dark hair that touched her supple waist.

It was the girl whom we have heard Kiowa Charley call Staria, and Quartz Dick the Gold Girl.

The tumultuous heaving of her bosom as she listened to the plans of the scarlet conspirators told how much she was interested in the man whose life they sought.

She did not see them enter the lodge; their voices had caused her to spring from the soft cot now at her feet; and she knew them as well

as if they had paraded their figures before her eyes.

Buffalo Bull, Black Knife, Elk Horn, Empty Quiver, Sky Touch, and Talking Bird—she repeated each name several times as the voice of the owner betrayed it.

For several moments after the departure of the six, Staria stood silent in her wigwam.

Blended with the indignation that filled her bosom was another element that troubled her.

She had heard from the assassin's lips the true story of the wagon in the square.

Where was the white girl who had fallen out?

Kiowa Charley had gone after her!

Would he find her alive and bring her into the village? Was the indiscreet action of the young bloods to give her a rival—a girl from the far East?

Staria clutched her little hands as she thought.

"No! no! no!" she cried. "He has often said—"

But she paused and started back.

Some unseen hand seemed to have been placed suddenly over her mouth.

What has he often said?

With a cry of anguish the Gold Girl flung herself upon the cot, and buried her face in her hands.

The darts of jealousy could not penetrate deeper than the stings of uncertainty.

Her cry had been heard by a person without; and he, a veritable giant, stopped at the very curtain of the wigwam.

"What's the matter with my yellow queen? She's goin' on as if her little heart war breakin'. Bu'st my ca'tridge-box! ef a little inquiry moughtn't do some good."

The bronze hand of Quartz Dick soon made an opening that revealed the interior of the lodge, and he found himself face to face with its passionate inmate.

The sunlight penetrating suddenly had driven the girl to her feet.

She stood before him with flashing eyes, clinched hands and disordered tresses—a beautiful portrait of a crossed woman!

The bully regretted that he had disturbed the girl, and was withdrawing when she sprung forward.

"Stay, Dick!" she cried. "I want to talk with you. Has he come back?"

"Not yet, my little one."

"Do you think—"

Staria paused.

Should she let this man know that she was jealous; that she was fearful that Kiowa Charley was going to bring a new face into the village? And why not?

Quartz Dick would try to get the new girl if she was pretty. In that he would be helping her.

"I'll try her, anyhow," said Dick to himself. "Ten minutes ago I'd hev kept my mouth shut; but I'll plant a few words hyar'bouts jest to see ef they'll grow."

"Yes, my girl, I expect he'll come back with a new face," he said to Staria before she could continue. "We white men ar' kinder onsart'in when it comes to love affairs. I'm lookin' fur 'im back every minute. I'm eager to see the

new girl; but I guess I'll not kiss 'er, eh, my little one?"

Staria heard the bully with a countenance that did not displease him.

"The seed will grow!" he said delightedly to himself. "After all, I'll not hev to give 'im one in the eye. He'll get a bit o' cold steel fur runnin' after strange women. The girl's too mad to talk."

The statue of love insulted before Quartz Dick seemed to confirm his last words. Staria's eyes were glaring like the tigress's before the spring.

"Good-mornin', girl," Dick said, drawing back—"thar ar' other fish in the sea. He's not the only sweet-scented shrub that blossoms on the plains. I'd rather hev that chap with an eye in the middle of his forehead, than—"

"Let him go! let him come back!" interrupted the Gold Girl.

"Thet's business!"

"He may bring the new flower with him; but it shall not bloom as long as the little blue bells that grow on the plains. He saved Staria's life in the wild land of the Apaches; she would give it in exchange for his smile. Now he goes after a white girl whose father is a soldier. What does he deserve for this?"

Quartz Dick did not reply, but he sent a quick glance at the knife that glittered in the girl's hand.

His eyes said: He ought to have the entire length of that blade!

"Ah! the big white man is silent; but his eyes talk. Charley, the Kiowa, shall have what he has always had—the love of Staria the Gold Girl; but the new face shall have—this!"

Quartz Dick sprung back.

The girl had stepped toward him, and the knife, with her last word, was thrust almost into his very face.

"Great spirits!" he gasped. "I said too much. I riled her too extensively! The seed I planted is producin' a crop o' thistles already. I'll cut 'em down an' try ag'in; but not hyar. Jest tech the girl that's comin' hyar with Kiowa Charley, an' I'll choke ye till I burst yer big black eyes. I'm the head devil of all! I war rocked in the cradle of cruelty by the hand ov crime, I war! The new gal b'longs to me—to Quartz Dick! Do you hear, my jealous pigeon? An' she's comin' hyar, too."

Yes, Bessie Lincoln was really coming to that nest of vipers and den of wolves!

CHAPTER VIII.

OLD EXPERIMENT'S VICTIM.

THE shades of another night were falling about the picturesque capital of Kiowa land; the sun had gone down behind the hills above the town, and the shadows of a brief twilight lay on the snow.

"Suthin's up—bet he don't come. From the way he talked when he rode off, one would hev supposed that the tail end of an hour would see 'im back. What do you say, Simon?"

But the gaunt Indian hunter seated among the chaparral did not reply. He kept his keen gray eyes fixed upon the savage village far below.

Old Experiment gave his tall companion a sneer and turned to Pepito, or the Seraph. It

was evident that he did not regard the youth with any favor.

"Ar' yer ears in workin' order?" the rough-voiced trailer asked. "I mean by that remark, can't you hear Kit comin' back?"

Pepito looked up into Old Experiment's face.

"Pepito does not hear Kit!" he said, in a tone that betokened alarm for the mountain king.

Then he put his ear to the ground.

"No horse," he said glancing up at Old Experiment.

"By jingo! why didn't I think ov it sooner?" cried the "Injun eddicator," suddenly striking his knee with his clinched hand while his face broadened into a smile of hope. "'Twouldn't be policy for Kit to come back in daylight, an' thet, too, with the gal—*ef he got 'er!* Pepito?"

The boy reluctantly removed his eyes from the shadowy Indian village upon which they had been constantly fixed all day, and looked questioningly into Old Experiment's face.

"Boy, I've got an idee!" said the hunter seating himself at the Seraph's side. "An idee, an' a suspicion. Ez to the first, I'll enlighten you; ez to the latter, I'll keep it myself. What would take you down thar—into the Injun town?"

The Seraph opened his deep eyes wide from astonishment.

"What would take my brother down?" he naturally asked.

"Scalps!" was the sententious reply. "To be sure, I'd like to go down thar with a revolver in each hand, step onto thet squar' an' yell, 'first class in spellin' stan' up!—spell de'th an' destruction!' Thet would stir my innards with the spoon ov bliss! But I'm talkin' to you, boy!"

"Kit said 'Stay here,'" the Seraph said.

"Thet star may be mighty high afore we see the old feller ag'in," Old Experiment said, as his eyes descried a brilliant star just peeping over the eastern horizon. "Ef he got the gal, mebbe he took her to Fort Sill many miles away—the old back trail, Pepito. Now you've been lookin' inter Injun-dom all day. Hev ye see'd anybody what looked nat'ral?"

Pepito almost started to his feet.

"I mean what I say," Old Experiment continued. "I see the question kind o' excites you. Mebbe I got a glimpse o' her, too."

The soft-skinned hand of the Seraph fell on Old Experiment's arm.

He was under the spell of some uncontrollable emotion.

In the gaunt hunter's eyes was a gleam of triumph.

Pepito looked like a person whose secret had suddenly been discovered. Had Old Experiment fathomed his eager gazing into the Kiowa town in the valley?

"She's a beauty, boy!" continued Kit Carson's comrade. "I—I think—by George! my robin, I know it's her."

"It is Inez!"

"That's it! she's the very one. An' among them Injuns, too!"

Pepito sent a quick look into the village.

"Now what would take you down thar to-night?"

The answer came before the last word left Old Experiment's lips.

"Inez!"

The scalp-hunter looked like a diplomat who had gained a great victory.

"Thar she is, my boy. Old Kit may not come back to-night. You've marked the wigwam; so heve I. It's the seventh one from the end. Your sister war lost a long time—stolen by a mean white man. Mebbe he's down thar, too. Ef I had a sister in the perdicament, by the speerits of my ancestors!"

"No more, brother!" interrupted Pepito. "Inez is at Pepito's feet; she is his long-lost sister. He will go down and bring her up from the lodges of the Kiowas. She has been waiting for him to come. Wait for Pepito, brother."

The youth left Old Experiment's side and glided to the spot where the horses were.

After awhile the figure of an apparent Indian boy came up from that direction, and halted before the old scalper.

"Wal, thet beats creation!" exclaimed Old Experiment gazing at the figure before him. "Ef you'd come crawlin' up behind me I'd hev knifed you fur a Kiowa. Thar's no danger in thet dress," he whispered, glancing at Simon, who, a short distance off, did not seem to notice the metamorphosis. "Ef ye're goin' you'd better be quick about it, ez Simon might look this way an' put his big arm afore you."

"Pepito go now; good-by, brother."

Old Experiment hesitated to take the hand which the boy extended.

"What's the use?" he suddenly exclaimed within himself. "He's never goin' to come back, an' I kin make it all right with Kit!"

Then he took the Seraph's hand.

"Hold on! I'll make you a better Injun!" he cried, and his hand diving into his buckskin pouch produced a strange-looking necklace of young bear claws which the boy permitted him to slip over his head.

"Thar! That tops you off!"

Pepito gave Old Experiment a pleased look, and the next instant was gone.

The hunter glanced at Simon Brane to see whether his game had been perceived. To all outward appearances it had not. Simon had not turned his head for hours; he was lying full length on the ground with his eyes fixed in a brown study upon the lodges of the Kiowas.

"I'm runnin' a risk—no! not much ov a one!" muttered Old Experiment. "When I'm off on a big scalp-hunt I don't want to be bothered with children. When I first sot eyes on thet young chicken, I sed he was no good, an' I wanted to call 'im a small edition ov my first class in spellin'. But what should Kit Carson do, but step up an' call him his young friend. Kit's always takin' up with some queer colored person. He even went so far once as to marry an Injun gal. His 'young friends' hev always got us into trouble. Up on B'ar River he took up with a young Pawnee an' the skunk burned us out; then he transferred his affections to a Mexican boy an' he stole our hosses, an' left us to fight the Apaches on foot. Now he's tacked himself to another Greaser—"

Old Experiment paused abruptly.

His quick eye had detected a dark object on the white surface below.

"He's got to the door of death—he's liftin' the latch now!" exclaimed the hunter, for the

familiar outlines of the figure had made him recognize it as the Seraph's. "If they take 'im alive he'll not betray us. I'm not afeard ov that. I put the b'ar-claws on him to make the thing sart'in. They'll settle his hash with the Kiowas. He were bound to get us into trouble—he's an evil genius."

While Old Experiment talked he kept his eyes fixed upon the figure just entering the village in the valley.

He could not conceal his success.

He had deliberately sent the Seraph into the jaws of death, for he really believed that his continued presence among them would only result in the failure of the expedition, if not in the doom of all.

All at once he turned to behold Simon Brane at his side.

"Whar is the Seraph?—Kit is comin' back!"

Old Experiment shook like a leaf; but only for a moment.

"Yas, whar is the youngster?" he asked in well-affected surprise. "Hev ye been down to the hosses?"

"No use in goin': he ain't thar!"

"By George! I wonder ef he's gone down to see who thet gal is he bez been lookin' at all day?"

But Simon Brane's brow grew clouded.

"I kin read you jest as if you war a primer in big print!" he said, slowly stepping up to Old Experiment. "Don't tell me, boy, thet you don't know anything about the Seraph. I don't like 'im any too well myself; but Old Kit would die fur the Greaser. He's down thar!"

Old Experiment looked into the village, and then into Simon's eyes. With the last look his tawny hand moved toward the butt of his longest revolver.

"We've been friends too long fur thet!" said Simon covering Old Experiment's hand with his own broad palm. "I understand yer motives an' I'll keep 'em. But Kit's been suspectin' you, I think, ever since we crossed the Canadian; an' he's terribly taken up with the boy! Experiment, I'm afeard that you've done the worst job ov yer life—the worst fur me, fur you, fur Kit Carson. But I'll try to git you out, ef it takes some o' the tallest lyin' on earth! Now keep a stiff lip under yer nose. Kit's comin'."

This seemed to be the case.

The sound of hoofs came from the direction in which they had seen the mountain man depart.

Old Experiment turned his face to the north and waited. Simon Brane stood beside him.

The face of the latter was troubled, and though he glanced often from the corners of his eyes at Old Experiment, he did not see that that worthy had half-drawn his revolver, while he waited in the starlight for the man whose confidence he had betrayed.

There was a certain desperateness in his look.

It was true that the life of Kit Carson hung on a slender thread.

CHAPTER IX.

BAGGED.

SILENT, and like statues among the chaparral above the Indian village, stood Simon

Brane and Old Experiment, waiting for Kit Carson.

"After all, it mayn't be Kit," Simon said to himself, as his hand drew his revolver. "The tramp doesn't sound like Santa Anna's. By gunlocks! he's stopped."

The last exclamation was spoken aloud, for the sound of hoofs on the frozen ground had suddenly ceased, and that at a point so near that only the uncertain light of the few stars that shone prevented the twain from seeing the night-rider.

"Stopped he hez!" echoed Old Experiment. "'Tisn't Kit, thet's sart'in. I'll go an' see."

Dropping his lank body almost to the ground, the scalp-hunter glided away as noiseless as the serpent, leaving Simon Brane alone.

"It war a bad job," muttered that worthy. "He'll pay fur it, too; mebbe all ov us will. It war an evil day when Kit took up with the Seraph."

Satisfied that the unseen horseman was not the old guide, Simon stood ready to receive a startling report from Old Experiment.

Several minutes winged their rapid journey over his head.

Then all at once came the rough voice of the gaunt scalper.

"First class in spellin', stan' up! Spell de'th an' destruction!"

Then bang! bang! bang!

Simon Brane leaped forward like a person shot from a catapult.

"Great Cæsar's ghost! gunlocks an' bufflers! I shot at—the devil!"

The sound of hoofs were ringing in Simon's ears. Old Experiment was standing among the low bushes with the whitest face that ever rose above them; the heavy revolvers had fallen from his nerveless hands and lay smoking at his feet.

"What on airth—"

"His Satanic Majesty—nobody else, Simon!" gasped Old Experiment. "Didn't you hear me order the first-class in spellin' to stand up?"

"Yes."

"Thet warn't necessary; it war merely a form—used in all well-regerlated schools. The class war right before me, a-sittin' on his hoss; but sech a scholar never stood before Old Experiment, the great Injun eddicator, in all his teachin'! He hadn't any nose, no mouth, no nothin' but a fiery eye that blazed right in the middle of his forehead!"

Simon Brane looked incredulously at the speaker.

"An' you shot three times at 'im?" he asked.

"No, only once!" was the reply.

"I heard three shots."

"Wal—mebbe—I did," said Old Experiment.

"Let us see."

Stooping, he lifted the revolvers from the snow and examined their chambers.

Three were empty.

"I must hev been excited!" he said, looking into Simon's face. "But, cuss me! ef I thought I shot more than once. I've got so used to shoot-in' into big classes thet the pistols pronounce the words a leetle faster than I fancied. But Simon—"

Old Experiment paused.

"Wal, go on!"

"When a man does a bad deed somethin' turns up against 'im. I didn't do right by the Seraph."

"Thet's so!"

"Somehow or other a public eddicator whips a scholar when he doesn't deserve a lick. Thet's jest what I've done to-night. Now I'm goin' to try to mend the matter. Do you want to go along?"

"Whar to, pardner?"

"Down thar!"

Simon Brane looked like a thunderstruck person into Old Experiment's face.

"No use, Simon; I'm goin'!" continued the old trailer, before Simon could reply. "Ef you don't want to go 'long, stay hyar till I or Kit comes back. I kin make a good-lookin' Kiowa outen my carcass in less than five minutes."

"I'm goin', too," fell from Brane's lips.

"Yer hand on thet!"

The two worthies grasped hands.

Old Experiment was one of the strangest characters that ever traversed the plains. When he did a wrong, and would acknowledge it, he would risk his life to repair it.

He had sent Kit Carson's *protege* into the jaws of death, hoping to get rid of the boy. He firmly believed that the mild-eyed youth was the evil genius of the expedition; he had regarded him with distrust from the first.

But the great wrong which he had committed, not only against the boy himself, but against his old comrade, Kit Carson, had suddenly flashed through his heart.

To repair it before Kit should return was now his sole object.

He would invade the Kiowa village and tear the youth away before discovery sealed his speedy doom.

A few minutes later two Indianified-looking fellows, mounted on horses, with buffalo-hide bridles, rode down from the chaparral.

There was no little excitement in the town.

The three pistol-shots ringing out clear and startling upon the cutting night air had roused the Indians.

But our two friends, admirably disguised, went through the crowds apparently unperceived and unrecognized.

Everywhere the keen eyes of Old Experiment roamed in search of the Seraph.

"I've got a bigger job on hands than lookin' for the youngster!" he whispered at the first opportunity, to his companion. "These Injuns make me eager to administer the first lesson in spellin'."

"If you try it, we're gone!" was the reply.

Encompassed by death, the two scalp-hunters sought for the boy.

Entirely unwatched?

No!

"Meet me in the squar' in ten minutes," said Old Experiment. "I've got an idee."

Separating, the friends went different ways, and each soon lost sight of the other.

Old Experiment, now on foot, went down the line of lodges. Not far behind him crept a giant, whose half-civilized garb would have proclaimed him a half-breed.

Rocky Mountain Kit.

When the boy hunter stopped, his pursuer would also halt, and crouch to the cold ground.

Old Experiment reached the lodge he sought.

It was a pretty structure, and the seventh one from the end of the line.

"I war right!" he ejaculated, after a moment of eavesdropping behind the structure. "The boy is in thar. He an' the gal ar' hev'n a talk. What does she say? By gunflints! The Seraph hez found his sister!"

Old Experiment started back.

"First, Simon, an' then the hosses!" he said, pleased with his spying. "Mebbe we'll take 'em both off—the boy, anyhow."

To find Simon Brane, get the horses, and, invading the Kiowa lodge, silence Staria and carry Pepito from the fate to which his hatred had sent him—this was Old Experiment's plan.

It would not occupy ten minutes.

He went swiftly back, reached the square, and tapped a tall figure on the shoulder.

"I tracked 'im down, Simon. Now for the hosses."

The animals were soon found, where they had been left at one side of the village.

"Hold on!" suddenly cried Old Experiment, halting with his hand upon his horse's neck, ready to spring upon his back. "Great Jehosaphat! suthin' hez happened."

Simon Brane sprung to his companion's side.

"Look hyar!" continued the trailer. "Ilyar's a piece ov paper! it war stickin' to Nightwind's shoulder," and he held the object up before Simon's eyes.

"Kin ye make it out?" eagerly asked Brane.

"Dunno; let me see. The letters ar' oncommon big an' mighty few."

The paper was thrust into the starlight, and Old Experiment studied it intensely.

"Simon! Simon! it can't be!" he suddenly exclaimed. "But yet it ar' his hand-writin'."

"Whose?"

"Look!"

The paper was seized by Simon Brane, and he read in a tone that reached his comrade's ear:

"Leave at once; ye ar' watched!"

The warning was not signed; no signature was needed. It was written by the hand that had killed Indians from the head-waters of the Missouri to the forks of the Rio Brazos.

The two men stared blankly into each other's face.

Kit Carson in the Indian town?

Impossible! but his hand, and his only, had traced the rude letters on the paper.

"We must git!" Simon Brane said, breaking the silence. "He's our cap'n; an' he'll get away safe an' sound."

"But the boy?"

"Take 'im, ov course."

"Then, hyar goes!"

The twain leaped upon the horses; but the next instant a voice, like the knell of doom, saluted their ears.

"Not so fast, my painted friends! I've got the drop on both ov ye. I've kivered yer right eyes with the best weepins that ever sent a sper-rit to kingdom kum. I'm the chap what hez watched ye. I'm the boss shooter of the plains—the walkin' death ov Kiowa land. I ginerally

check baggage cla'r through. Git off them animiles!"

The astonished men looked at the speaker. Tall and robust, he was a veritable giant, and in each hand he held a revolver of the largest pattern at full cock.

They were "covered" by the deadly weapons.

"I guess you've got us, stranger," said Simon Brane.

"Got yo? I should think I hev. I've had ye fur twenty minutes. When I first see'd ye I said to myself: 'Thar ar' Old Experiment an' Simon Brane!'"

The man with the pistols actually knew their names!

Old Experiment started.

"By gunstocks! you must be Quartz Dick!" he said.

"Thet's my handle. I'm the angel thet you whipped up on the Cheyenne, an' then tied to a wild mustang. How much mercy are you expectin' just now?"

Mercy from that devil?

Old Experiment slid from his horse.

"Mebbe he hezn't diskivered Kit. We'll hope so!" he murmured.

CHAPTER X.

THE MAD SHOOTER.

THERE was no mercy in the devilish eyes that shot all the hatred of the ruffian at Old Experiment and Simon Brane.

"I know you're not lookin' for mercy," said Quartz Dick. "But I'm not the worst feller on earth. I oughter give ye the ball in the eye arter my own peculiar style; but I'll do the fair thin' by ye. Now, Old Experiment, what brought ye hyar?"

The men exchanged significant glances.

"We come on business, ov course," was the reply.

"Goin' to be stubborn, eh?" flashed the bully, madly. "Mebbe I'll hev to revoke my proclamation ov mercy. Talk or die. Take yer choice. Are ye alone?"

"Yes."

"I kin b'lieve that if I please," was the reply. "Thar's a strange Injun hyar besides you men. Ef we was to wash the paint off him, would not he look like Kit Carson's twin brother, eh, my swallows?"

The ruffian's last words fell like thunderbolts upon the scalper's ears.

"Kit Carson hyar?" ejaculated Simon.

"Did I say so?"

"Not exactly, Dick; but—"

"By the jumpin' jingo! I know it now," was the interruption. "I've been livin' hyar in sweet anticipation fur ten years. I knowed you fellars 'd fall into my hands sometime. Thar's a kind o' gravitation that draws old enemies together, an' it's drawn you all the way from the Cheyenne. Boys, that very mustang that I rode that time ar' hyar now; an' he's the best hoss in these parts."

Before Quartz Dick's last word had ceased to ring in the scalp-hunter's ears, a cry fell from his lips.

The next moment a score of dark forms made their appearance, as if they had been concealed near by, waiting for the summons.

The hands of our friends moved mechanically toward their weapons; but the flash of Quartz Dick's eyes, and his threatening sentence deterred them:

"Death ef ye tech 'em!" he said.

The situation was now of the most thrilling kind.

"Thar ar' two hawks in dove-feathers!" said Quartz Dick whirling upon the Kiowas whom his cry had called up. "Ef ye'd wash the paint off their faces ye'd fairly screech with delight. But somewhar in the camp is another whose scalp is wuth all the ponies in Kiowadom. But these false Injuns first—old friends ov mine—close acquaintances I might almost say; used to bunk together in the Rockies. They war down hyar last night, an' they shot Little Buck. Somehow or other the bullet hit 'im in the eye. Arter they shot 'im, they pitched 'im into the big fever lodge."

"Thet's an orthodox lie!" said Old Experiment. "We warn't hyar last night; but, I reckon as how we see'd a bit o' shootin' frum whar we war!"

Quartz Dick laughed.

"Just as ef the truth will do you good hyar!" he cried. "No, my old friends, you've got to the end ov yer last scalp-trail—so hez the other man. Now, give in like men. Go an' take 'em, Kiowas! I'll keep 'em kivered!"

The Indians at his words went toward the two scalpers. Still covered by the formidable pistols.

"They've got us!" Old Experiment whispered to Simon. "Keep a stiff upper lip. We'll live to call up the first class in spellin' more'n once after to-night."

A moment later they were captives.

"Ye're sensible," said Quartz Dick. "Now I'll take a nigh view ov yer faces which I hev'n't had fur ten years."

The Indians stood close around the prisoners; their scarlet hands encircled their arms.

The giant bully came forward with a leer of triumph in his eyes. At that moment of personal victory over old foes, he forgot Bessie Lincoln, then nearer than he suspected—forgot, too, the rival over whom he must triumph before he could win the fight for her charms.

"You don't look nat'ral with the paint on!" he said, laughing in Old Experiment's face. "Now when I catch the other white skunk—the meanest one ov you three—I'll inaugurate the biggest an' the bloodiest time ever held in this wild land. He isn't far off—"

"No! he's right hyar!"

Quartz Dick could not but start at the sound of the unexpected words; and while they still fell upon his ears, a gaunt Indian sprung forward.

"The meanest skunk ov all extends his compliments to you, Quartz Dick!"

With the last words the painted speaker darted upon the thunderstruck bully, and the clinched hand that landed with the force of a trip-hammer in his face, sent him reeling from the spot!

The Kiowas started astonished from the captives.

"To the hosses!" cried the punisher. "We've botched things terribly to-night. But I couldn't

help it. To the hosses! the red-skins are thunderstruck. What on earth—"

Kit Carson—for the speaker was the famous mountain guide—sprung toward Old Experiment, who had leaped back and drawn his revolvers.

"First class in spellin', stan' up! Spell de'th an' destruction!"

His long arms went up with the last words, and before old Kit reached his side his revolvers were pouring death into the astounded group of Indians.

"I'm the great Injun eddicator ov the West!" bang! bang! "I've spent half my nat'ral life" bang! "teachin' Injuns" bang! "that life is one o' the most onsart'inist things that ar'!"

His deadly pistols cracked with precision and rapidity.

He went forward, straight upon his victims, talking and shooting at the same time.

"First class in spellin', take your seats. Second class—"

The man who reached the mad scalper's side, at this juncture, carried a tempest in his eyes.

It was Kit Carson.

"Stop!" he thundered, tearing down the outstretched arm of Old Experiment. "Thar ar' no Injuns before you. What you hev'n't killed hev fled. Ar' you mad? You'll shoot us all to the stake. Listen! The hull village is wild—crazy! To the hosses. Quick!"

He pushed Old Experiment toward the devoted beasts, which had not stirred from their track; then whirling upon Simon Brane, he pointed toward the animals.

Kit Carson had spoken truly.

A bedlam seemed to be reigning among the lodges just discernible in the starlight. Dark forms were already visible on the snow.

"Mount an' git!" thundered the old guide, as he stood before his companions, a revolver clutched in his right hand. "This may be our last scalp-hunt. Thar's death over yonder on the snow!"

"An' a right smart bit ov it whar the class did its last spellin'!" said Old Experiment.

The two men vaulted upon the backs of the steeds; but not a moment too soon.

A jet of fire flashed from a score of guns where the wigwams stood, and bullets whizzed through the air.

"Hit, by hokey!" cried Old Experiment, as the horses bounded away.

"I say thet I've got a bullet somewhar in my carcass—jest whar, I can't exactly tell. Whoa, Nightwind. I want to give 'em a partin' lesson."

Despite the danger that surrounded them, the rash scalper halted and whirled on his steed.

"Second class in spellin' stan' up! Spell bullets and blood!"

Then his deadly pistols flashed once more before his face, nor did he stop firing until the last chamber had been emptied.

Hard riding took them speedily from the village, and they found themselves unpursued on the plain beyond.

"Halt!"

They drew rein at Simon Brane's command.

"Are you badly shot?" he said to his companion.

"A bullet in the leg—that's all," was the response. "But whar's Kit?"

"Don't you know?"

There was a strange look in Simon's eye as he leaned forward till his face almost touched Old Experiment's.

"No. Simon, you look as ef suthin' hez happened 'im."

"Suthin' hez."

"Shot by the red skunks?"

"I wish he war!"

"Great Cæsar's ghost!" gasped Old Experiment, almost falling from his horse. "Did I do it, Simon? did I shoot Kit Carson? Nol yer lyin' old boy! My bullets know old Kit! They wouldn't tech 'im!"

Simon Brane did not reply. His face was seriousness mixed with the deepest sorrow.

"Simon! Simon! don't ye lie?" cried the old scalper, grasping the arm of the silent man.

"I'm afeard I don't!" was forced from Simon's lips.

The next instant the pistol of Old Experiment was thrust into his hand.

"Hyar!" he cried. "Take this wepin an' do yer duty. Kit Carson saved yer life once, an' I heard you swear that you'd kill the man—red or white—that teched 'im. Now keep yer word, er Old Experiment will call you coward ez long ez he lives. What! ar' ye cryin', Simon? Yer old eyes ar' wet. Be a man! take this wepin, I say, an' kill the fool who slew Rocky Mountain Kit."

But Simon Brane, with a shudder, pushed the pistol aside.

"I can't do *that*!" he cried.

"Can't? Whar's yer manhood, Simon? I thought you loved Kit Carson."

But the trailer, with his gray eyes full of tears, did not answer.

CHAPTER XI.

A CHANGE OF SCENE.

STILL vivid, no doubt, in the reader's recollection is the encounter between Old Experiment and the strange being with a single eye among the chaparral on the hill above the Indian village.

If the waiting scouts could have seen the cyclops riding toward their place of concealment, they would have known that he expected to find somebody there. His movements proclaimed this.

Suddenly confronted by the old trailer, with a heavy revolver in each hand, he was taken aback, nor did he recover until three bullets had leaped from the oily grooves. Fortunately for the cyclopean rider, the excitement of Old Experiment's nerves turned the balls from their intended victim, and without essaying to reply, although he had pistols at his command, he turned and dashed away.

Let us for a few minutes follow.

After reaching the plain below he drew rein, and for several moments turned his deformed face toward the north, and allowed the wind to blow cuttingly against it.

The eye in the center of his forehead looked more like a star than a visionary orb. It scintillated like a diamond, sending forth strange rays of light in the beams of the moon.

All at once, as if having reached a conclusion, he wheeled and dashed into the Kiowa village, and was soon lost among the lodges.

Half an hour later, and while Old Experiment and Simon Brane were searching for the Seraph, an elegant white horse bearing this same cyclopean mystery emerged from the village.

Not far away, as a hundred neighs indicated, was situated a corral containing a herd of mustangs. Toward this place the white horse went.

The fretful steeds, guarded by several Indians, seemed to discover the presence of the stranger. The guards sprung up, and with ready guns darted forward, but to start back with cries of terror.

Out on the plain but a short distance from the corral, with the moonlight falling uninterrupted on his face, sat the mystery on his white horse.

"Woonah! Woonah!"* gasped the Indians in accents of genuine fright, as they took to their heels without having lifted a weapon against the nocturnal visitor.

In the corral a picture of excitement might also have been seen. The mustangs with one accord had rushed to that part of the rude inclosure that confronted the cyclops. There, with fore-feet planted firmly on the ground, with arched necks thrown back, their handsome heads erect, and eyes full of fire, they gazed at the apparition on the plain.

When the mystery darted forward it seemed that he would charge straight into the corral; but instead, he veered suddenly to the left, and swept round it with the agility of the swallow. Three wild but almost human sounds came from the throat of his white steed, and the mustangs whirling, followed him around the inclosure.

Thrice he rode around the place, watched from afar by the shivering and superstitious Indian guards, and then suddenly, like an arrow shot from an elk-horn bow, he dashed toward the north.

The next moment came the destruction of the corral. The mustangs, mad, as it were, dashed against the barrier of felled chaparral, flung it in every direction, and shot pell-mell after the white horse.

The Indians uttered loud cries of wonder and astonishment.

The cyclops turning his head, saw from his single eye the oncoming herd, and a moment later they were all around him whinnying with strange delight, and biting his white horse in playful mood.

While the red guards looked, he disappeared with the motley herd at his heels, and the thunder of their hoofs was the only sound that saluted their ears.

This was the strange being whom Kit Carson encountered on the Wichita plains, as we have already seen; and we may safely say that the herd which he headed then, he leads once more.

"For an hour the unbridled cavalcade kept in straight course, the mustang king erect on the back of his white horse, with his soulless face turned against the north wind.

* The evil rider!"

All at once he sprung erect on his steed, and waved his right hand at the herd behind. Instantly the dashing mustangs came to a halt, that drove many upon their haunches. But order and silence, save the heavy panting, soon followed.

Proud of his control over the beautiful herd, the cyclops turned, and looked over the snowy plain that seemed to stretch into eternity through the soft moonlight.

The white horse raised his fox-like ears; his companions followed his example, and lifted their heads.

Something was advancing, coming from the northeast. It had the steady gallop of a horse accustomed to the plains.

It was this that had halted the mustangs; above the sound of their hoof-beats the cyclopean rider had heard the tramp of the single horse.

Nearer and nearer came the still unseen horse—for such the approaching object certainly was.

Then a black spot appeared on the snow.

The white steed's rider dropped astride of him again; but never took the one eye off the stain on the ground.

The horse thus closely watched came on until it was within one hundred yards of the herd. Then, as if it had noticed it for the first time, it came to a sudden halt.

The cyclops picked up his reins, and sent a glance to the revolvers in his belt.

If his eye possessed extraordinary powers of vision, he could have seen that the man on the horse ahead was not an Indian.

But this was not all.

In his brawny arms he held a female figure.

The cold wind had whitened the fair face, although it was pressed against his broad chest. He wore no hat; his shock of dark hair gave him an uncouth and brigandish appearance.

His presence there, his look, his *personnel*, said that he had not come honestly by the beautiful face in his arms.

He was staring at the herd halted on the plain, but he did not see the strange captain.

"Them horses must be out on a lark!" fell from his bearded lips. "I heard 'em awhile back; then I didn't hear 'em. Now hyar they ar' lookin' at me as if I war a spectur, or suthin' jest as bad. By Jovel 'twould be a sight for old Kit Carson's gal; but she's asleep, so I won't wake 'er. I hed to laugh to myself when Kit come to my ranch last night with this angel, an' told me to keep 'er till he came back. He called me Parson; but I never let on—never told the old chap that the Parson hes been dead these ten year—an' that I am his twin brother. What brought Kit down into this country? I'll not puzzle myself with that question. I know he's hyar—that's enough, an' I know, too, that Kiowa Charley 'll give me more fur this beauty than I kin make on the old ranch in six months."

The speaker paused almost abruptly, for a horse, apparently riderless, had advanced from the herd.

"It's the leader!" he said. "By my knife! he's white es snow—one ov them rare critturs

thet kin outrun the wind. How kin I git him? Ef I warn't bothered by the gal, I'd crease the mustang. Mebbe I kin do it anyhow."

Such a superb creature as the white mustang was not to be caught every day on the plain. He was symmetry itself.

With his last exclamation, the betrayer of Kit Carson's confidence unslung a carbine.

But the white horse continued to approach with his head turned squarely upon him, and prevented the creasing operation.

"Cuss 'im! he's goin' to come up an' take a look at the gal!" ejaculated the man, with a ludicrous smile about the corners of his mouth. "He's been ridden afore; he's somebody's pet. Wal, come on, my beauty. I've got the purtiest gal hyar thet ever saw the plains. She's Kiowa Charley's sweetheart—er she will be when we strike the bargain."

The traitor saw no rider as the white came up, but all at once, as his own steed stretched out his neck to greet the new-comer, something shot over the snowy back—sprung up, as it were, through the white mane—and sat bolt upright before him!

"The mystery, by my soul! Great Wichita! who'd 'a' thought it?"

The speaker reeled from the hideous face that had suddenly shot into sight. His cry roused the girl. He almost fell from his horse.

"The devil on his pale horse! My beauty, you don't want to see 'im. 'Twould shatter all your nerves, fur he hesn't any face—nothin' but one burnin' eye."

As he spoke he covered his companion's face with his left hand, and grasped the reins with his right.

But his horse did not dart forward, for before he could speak or apply the heavy Spanish spurs that were bloody at his heels, the Cyclops shot at him with a force wholly irresistible, and madly tore the girl from his arms.

At the same time a blow that seemed to the astonished man to proceed from the one glittering eye sent him tumbling from his seat, and his horse bounded toward the herd.

The girl—none other than Bessie Lincoln, reader—had fallen into the hands of the mystery of the plains.

Gazing upon his prize with evident delight, the wild mustanger regained the head of the herd before the outwitted man had fairly regained his feet. But when he did, he saw the white horse place himself at the head of the herd once more.

"The devil ar' goin' to ride me down!" gasped the traitor. "Not content with gettin' the gal, he must make mince-meat outen old Jim Justice."

The wild mustangs were actually moving toward him. What could he do?

Behind him stretched a treeless waste—before him—a death whose spectacle froze his blood!

He saw the white mustang; but only for a moment.

All at once the equine ranks parted; but came together again.

Beyond them, now motionless and alone on the plain, he saw the snowy horse and his double burden.

"Just let me git outen this, an' I'll stick to the

old ranch furever!" he cried. "To be tramped to death, with no time to repent—"

The hoof-beats drowned his words, but the next moment, with a wild cry, he threw himself against the foremost horses.

His cry still echoed afar when the trained herd wheeled and dashed back to their master, waiting for them.

Where Jim Justico had sacrificed himself, there was a dark object on the disturbed snow.

It was a horrible doom; but one not entirely undeserved by the man who, for gain, had betrayed the confidence of Rocky Mountain Kit.

CHAPTER XII.

A TIGER LOOSE.

"STAN' back! don't you see thet I'm mad all over? Go an' look at yer defunct brothers—go an' sw'ar over them thet you'll hunt down an' skin alive the fellers what did thet. I don't want Injun sympathy. It arn't the kind o' liniment thet heals a face what hez been hit by a sledge-hammer er a club. Git out; giv' Quartz Dick room to sling himself. An' ye'd better scatter too, fur I've got my hands on these eye-spotters; an' I'm kind o' narvous-like besides."

The speaker was walking up and down before a group of astonished Indians. He was in a tempest of rage.

In each hand he carried a heavy revolver, which, at full cock, he constantly swung about him.

We have seen him go to the ground from the fist of Rocky Mountain Kit.

If the blow had been delivered by an unseen assailant, Quartz Dick upon recovery would doubtless have declared that he had been felled with a club.

At the shots which Old Experiment poured into the indistinct Indian ranks from the back of his horse the bully regained consciousness.

He found himself surrounded by a crowd of excited red-skins, who plied him for information concerning the raiders.

His reply was a series of mad oaths and charging them from his immediate front, he began to stride back and forth before them, all the while giving vent to his great rage.

"Go an' count yer dead!" he yelled, stopping suddenly before the Kiowas. "You've got more'n enough out there to start a Christian graveyard. From the look of affairs one would think that the angel ov death hed called around. I don't want you hyar. I want to cuss an' think—to think an' cuss!"

The Indians left the mad bully and gathered about the victims of Old Experiment's weapon. They lay where they had fallen on the light covering of snow—ten forms that would tread the war trail no more, nor vault upon the mustang for the border raid.

The "first class in spelling" would not be called up again by the master.

With the discovery of their dead a series of unearthly yells awoke the echoes of the night. From every part of the vast village the shrieks were taken up, and the crowd was joined by all the old crones within its boundaries. These uncouth beldams, with disheveled hair and repulsive features, threw themselves upon the dead

and rendered the scene disgusting and terrible in the extreme.

Meanwhile, Quartz Dick was continuing his pace, the maddest man no doubt on the Kiowa plains.

His face, not handsome at any time, was momentarily becoming less so by discoloration, the effects of old Kit's hammer-like blow. Indeed, he indistinctly saw the star that seemed to laugh at his misfortune.

"Kit's muscles don't weaken ez he git's older!" said the bruised white Indian. "He's got the same old leverage to his arm that he used to hev on the Pawnees an' Cheyenne. I knowed he war in camp; but I didn't think he war so nigh—hedn't any idea of his presence till I got his fist between my telescopes. Curso 'im! I could chaw 'im up! I wouldn't eye-spot him! I'd literally eat his heart, an' thet right afore his eyes. By George! I'm goin' blind, or else them stars ar' all goin' out. Howl on, Kiowa dogs," to the Indians. "Ef you had Quartz Dick's physiognomy through life, thar'd be a thunderin' sight ov old bachelors in Injundum. Kit Carson leaves his work jist like the butcher what strikes his beeves—only he don't break skulls with his bunched fingers!"

Quartz Dick staggered rather than walked from the spot of his encounter with Kit Carson. He could see but indistinctly now, as his eyes had swelled almost shut.

But he managed to reach his habitation in the interior of which he solaced himself with a glass of burning liquor, some quantity of which he applied to his disfigured face.

Above the eyes the knuckles of the mountain man had laid the cuticle open, making a ghastly line of crimson.

As the whisky touched the gaping flesh, Quartz Dick sprung clear of the ground and cursed in his agony. But then he grated his teeth and stamped the earth as with a stern resolution he continued to bathe the wound.

It was not dark in the little apartment which the renegade had entered. The rays of the old tin lamp that he had lighted revealed the place, uncouth in appointments and squalid in arrangements. An old mirror cracked as if by a spent ball, as the streaks radiated from a common center, stood on a barrel, and aided the bully in his self-doctoring. Anybody but the afflicted man himself would have laughed at the reflection in the glass. From each of the divisions created by the break, the face of an imp seemed to grin.

Quartz Dick saw them, but kept his teeth hard pressed and continued to apply the magical liquor. Magical, we say, for the swelling soon began to disappear, and once more his eyes flashed their mad fire uninterrupted by hillocks of flesh. But a dark discoloration, which the whisky could not remove, still remained.

"Now I begin to look decent once more!" cried the bully stopping back. "I never preached the use ov whisky out'ardly, but a fellar hez to go back on his religion occasionally. Now I'm ready fur Kit. Didn't I hear the Injuns say that but two persons ran off—the two what hed the hosses? They war Old Experiment an' Simon Brane. Kit hed no animals—not thar, at any rate. But the red-skins ar' mistaken. He

wouldn't stay hyar when he hez been diskivered, an' thet by such a devil ez Quartz Dick. No, sir! I know old Kit too well for thet."

The speaker was at the door of his abode with the last emphatic declaration on his lips, and as he threw it open a cry of joy fell from his tongue.

He could see the stars once more in all their brilliancy.

Turning his face toward that portion of the village where the scenes lately witnessed had occurred he heard but little to excite him.

"The coyotes hev quit hollerin'," he said. "A Kiowa kin out-mourn the world for a little while; but all at once he shuts up like an oyster; an' then— What new rumpus is up now?"

A startling cry was approaching the square from the north.

Quartz Dick heard it plainly.

"Woonah! Woonah! horses all go off with Woonah on white mustang."

"One big event follows another hyar jist ez they do in the States," muttered the renegade. "So that white mustang and his rider hev been about again."

The Indians who were spreading the intelligence of the evil rider's appearance, turned out to be guards of the corral.

They soon came in sight.

"Stop an' tell me all about it!" suddenly cried Quartz Dick, springing into the street before his abode and bringing the foremost Indian to a sudden halt.

The corral-guard told his story, and with the last word the bully shoved him forward.

"Go an' scare yer friends out o' their skins!" he said. "I'll carry out an idea thet will throw some light upon this devil of the plains."

The Kiowa had given Dick a highly embellished narrative of the mystery's stampede of the corraled herd; in it was the information that they (the guards) had waited a long time for his return.

"Ef the white hoss isn't in the stable it will prove it!" ejaculated the bully as he moved rapidly away. "I hev more'n once suspicioned 'im. The other time I thought I hed the chap; but I found the hoss thar, dry ez a hair."

A few moments later he reached the large structure from which we have seen Kiowa Charley take the horse Midnight, and opened the "door."

"Mornin'?" he called, thrusting his evil countenance into the gloom. "Mornin', ar' ye thar?"

In response to his voice there came a whinny from the interior of the structure, and a white equine head appeared at the opening.

"Hyar ye ar'!" cried Dick, putting forth his hand. "An' wet as a drowned rat, too! I've got the proof at last; hoss-flesh won't lie. The snow-flake is as wet ez ef he hed carried double!"

With a pleased look Quartz Dick turned away, only to utter a cry of astonishment and to dart forward upon a figure that glided over the snow, and disappeared 'round the nearest lodge.

"You, my little one? By my life! I expected not to find you hyar. Say, whar ar' ye goin',

an' after what? Ain't that a knife ye'r' holdin' along yer sleeve? Yer eyes dance like crazy stars! They're chock-full o' that kind o' madness thet gives a feller a knife whar he gits his breath from. Who are ye huntin'? Open yer mouth, er I'll transfer my hand from yer arm to yer stretch o' throat!"

The little figure that the vise-like hand of Quartz Dick was holding out as though it were an atom, was no other than that of Staria, the Gold Girl.

Her frame trembled under the influence of the excitement which controlled her.

The long blade pressed against her arm, strive as she might to hide it, revealed itself by its baleful glitter.

"Tell me what's up, er I'll shake ye to pieces!" menaced the ruffian. "From yer looks, I'd think thet Kiowa Charley hez brought the new sweetheart into camp."

At this, Staria's eyes flashed a more intense light.

"I knowed it!" ejaculated Dick. "He war a long time gettin' 'er, but I knowed all the time thet she would come! Where is the new gal?"

"Where he left her!"

"An' thet is—"

"Where Staria was taking her knife!" flashed the girl.

"Bound to kill the new sweetheart, eh?" grinned Quartz Dick. "Why don't you strike him?"

"Not Charley: no! no! no!" said the girl, drawing back. "Staria love him too well. He saved her from the Apaches. But the white girl shall not steal his heart from her. Staria will go to her. She will go now!"

A mad jerk followed the utterance of the last word, and the Gold Girl tore herself from Quartz Dick's gripe.

"Not so fast, my beauty!" he cried, as his hand shot forward to detain her. "Tech the new gal, an' I'll mark yer face for all time to come!"

But his hand did not close upon the figure of the jealous girl; she was beyond his reach.

"I'll mark ye now!" he hissed, as a revolver leaped from his belt. "It won't be an eye-shot, but—"

Quartz Dick cocked the weapon, but did not lift it at the flying girl.

A figure had stepped from the lodge before him, and he stood face to face with his handsome young rival, Kiowa Charley.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE GOLD GIRL AND HER RIVAL.

STARIA, the jealous Gold Girl, saved from Quartz Dick's pistol by the sudden appearance of Kiowa Charley, continued her flight.

The knife, still clutched tightly in her hand, stretched its shining length along her beautiful arm.

This blade she had promised herself to dye with the blood of Bessie Lincoln, for had not Kiowa Charley brought her to the village to supplant her (Staria) in his heart?

She had marked the lodge to which the major's daughter had been taken by the white Kiowa; and she was on her way to it when

stopped and questioned by Quartz Dick, as already recorded.

She knew the villain well from whose clutches she had torn herself, and she expected a ball in the back as she darted away.

But as none came, she congratulated herself, wondering why the bully did not shoot.

Continuing her course, the Gold Girl did not pause until she reached a lodge which had no characteristics that distinguished it above the many others that surrounded it.

But the eyes of the revengeful girl sparkled as she gazed, and gliding up to the skins she listened with intense eagerness visible on her varying countenance.

At last, with nervous fingers, she parted the curtains, and admitted a flood of moonlight, the knife slightly raised from her arm and the member drawn back as if ready for a blow.

The interior of the wigwam was dimly lighted; it was filled with silence, too, and Staria could not distinguish the object of her ire.

With her heart in her throat, she stood there, listening and looking for many seconds.

At last a movement within made her draw back.

The lodge was inhabited after all.

"It is one of my sex!" Staria heard a voice say. "She does not look like an Indian girl. Can it be that one of my own race is here to befriend me in this wild country?"

With the last words still falling from the lips of the indistinguishable speaker, a figure came forward—the lamb was walking straight into the wolf's jaws.

"Ah! you are a sister of mine! How happy I am!"

Staria started back, for the girl whom she sought—Bessie Lincoln—stood before her, with her young heart full of woman's trustfulness, and with her empty hands extended toward her.

It was a strange scene! jealous rage and pleading innocence face to face in the land of the savage.

"I was right!" continued Bessie as if addressing some one at her side while she continued to gaze into the face of the startled Gold Girl.

"She is not an Indian. I shall find a friend, now that I am in need. She will help to comfort me, and, as many of my sex have done before, help to save. Sister?"

Bessie Lincoln advanced to the wigwam-door as the gentle appellation fell from her tongue, and showed herself in the moonlight with her rich dark hair falling bountifully over her shoulders, and her handsome figure in an admirable pose.

Staria instinctively hid the knife; there was something about her whiter sister that made the blade creep out of sight.

"You are not dumb!" cried Bessie. "I am a captive here—I am alone and in need of friendship. I would like to have you for my sister, for captivity without a companion is dreary beyond description."

The voice of the soldier's daughter was full of sweetness.

The fierce eyes of the Gold Girl softened before it.

But her fingers still clutched the knife sharp-

ened for the victim standing lamb-like before her.

"No! no!" she cried. "The new girl cannot be Staria's sister. There is a wide trail between them!"

"Why do you call me a new girl?"

"Staria is the old one now. She was not two sleeps ago. Then Kiowa Charley smiled only for her; then he came to her lodge and sat a long time, while his voice, sweet as the song of the night-bird, filled her ears."

"I see! I see!" exclaimed Bessie. "The girl is jealous; she is in love with the young man who took me from the lodge to which that strange being carried me. So his name is Kiowa Charley. Ah! he is fortunate to be loved by such a pretty creature. I wonder how far she would carry her jealousy?"

Then Bessie stepped fairly into the moonlight, and toward the yellow girl.

"Then I am the new girl—Kiowa Charley's last love?" she said with a smile. "You should not get angry at that. In our land we win hearts wherever we can. I shall exercise the same right here. There are good-looking chiefs here who would chase the buffalo to the rivers of the north, or hunt the eagle on the highest cliffs of the Rockies for your smiles. Why, my sister, you could set all Kiowa-land in an uproar were you to put your charms on the market."

Much of Bessie's speech was unintelligible to Staria; but she caught the drift of it. The new girl recommended her to confine her heart conquests to the young red scalpers and marauders of the plains, and abandon to her wiles the possession of Charley the white Kiowa.

This was enough to bring the mad blaze back to her eyes; it could have had no other effect.

Like the Malay, unable to control himself, Staria sprang forward.

"So the new girl has resolved to take the mustang king from the Gold Girl?" she cried. "She has come from the land where the strong lodges of the white people outnumber the flowers on the plains to steal him away. What did she say about the man with the strange face?"

"He found me on the plains afar off, and brought me to this Indian town," answered Bessie. "He put me in a wigwam here and went away. Presently Kiowa Charley came, and rescuing me from the mystery, conveyed me to this lodge."

Staria shook her head incredulously.

"The tongue of the new girl treads a soft path; but she made it before she saw Staria. The wild mystery never enters the village; his home is where no Kiowa has ever been; the mustangs follow where he leads, but never, never has he come into the lodges of the red people. Thus Staria breaks the pretty path the new girl's tongue has made. But let her answer the Gold Girl. What does she intend doing!—when will she leave the land of the Kiowas?"

"As soon as I can; you may depend upon that. I have a father in one of the United States forts. My heart is always with him."

"When it is not with Charley, the Kiowa, eh?"

"If you will have it so—yes!" Bessie said, with a smile.

"Then we cannot be sisters; *he* cannot love the new girl and Staria at the same time. In that land from whence the cold wind comes the white man has many squaws; but he cannot have many here. Up there the laws says 'yes,' here the knife says *no*!"

Bessie Lincoln sprung back with a cry of horror that made her blood run cold.

For the first time she saw the knife that glittered in the Gold Girl's hand.

"Merciful heavens! I've roused a tigress!" fell from her lips. "I did not intend that my words should produce such result. What can I do? Can I talk her jealous anger down?"

Simultaneous with Bessie Lincoln's shrinking back, Staria bounded forward, and her left hand with the quickness of the cobra's dart closed about her wrist.

"My sister—"

"No sister!" was the interruption. "The new girl shall not steal the king of the mustangs from Staria. She has sharpened the knife that shines in her hands for the heart that came from the north to take him from her lodge. See! the moonbeams dance along it like little Kiowa girls dancing at the dog-feast. When Staria strikes they cannot be seen, for the blood of the new girl will hide them!"

Bessie Lincoln could not cry aloud. She felt the hand of the Gold Girl, cold as ice, at her wrist; she saw the basilisk eyes that gleamed in her head, and then glanced at the slender blade.

"Am I to die thus?" she thought. "Is this to be my doom far from father's embrace? Oh, Heaven help me, for I am powerless to help myself."

All volition had deserted the soldier's child; she was as completely in the power of the jealous girl, as the criminal is in the hands of the executioner.

"Staria will not let two people tread the path that leads to Kiowa Charley's heart! It was made for one; it is not wide enough for two. The hands that made it gave it to the Gold Girl, and she fringed it with many flowers. Does the new girl grow white? Ah! she thinks of the wrong step she has taken. Did the fame of Charley reach clean to the settled land of the whites? If she cannot speak, the knife that clears the path will do its work. Quartz Dick shoots but once, and his bullet finds the eye of his foe. Staria, the Gold Girl, makes one stroke, and the knife touches the heart that loves, hates, and steals!"

As the last words fell hissing from the lips of the beautiful demoness, the knife shot upward, and the next moment the frenzied arm came down, but with a cry of pain ringing out upon the crisp November air.

This cry, pealing not from Bessie's lips but Staria's, followed quickly upon the twang of a bow-string, and in the arm which had sent the knife toward the new girl's heart, the barbed shaft of an Indian arrow stuck!

Of course the Gold Girl's grasp on Bessie's wrist relaxed, and without a sound, but with the appearance of a person fatally wounded, the white girl reeled and fell through the curtains of the lodge.

For a moment Staria stood alone where she

had struck, then she started forward, but halted suddenly, and leaped back.

In the shadow of the lodge stood a boyish figure, and in his hands were clutched an Indian bow at least five feet in length.

"You? You?" dropped in accents of surprise from the Gold Girl's tongue. "Does your arrow find my flesh?"

And then turning she hastened away.

The boy sprung forward.

"Inez! Inez, my sister!" he cried. "I could have pierced your heart; but I only pierced your arm. You are my sister, Inez; but you lifted your arm against the girl whose life Kit Carson wants to save. Ah! she does not love Kiowa Charley. Inez, if you will come back, I will tell you all. Sister, will you not come back to Pepito?"

But Staria, the jealous, had disappeared, and the boy stood in the shadow of the lodge alone with his bow.

Presently he crept forward and looked in.

At the threshold lay Bessie Lincoln with a deathly pallor on her beautiful face, and a crimson stain on her bosom.

What? had he released the arrow too tardily?

He dropped the curtains and staggered back.

"Santissima! what will Kit say when he knows?" he cried. "Ah! the Seraph will not tell him, for he would curse him for not shooting sooner, and push him away from him forever!"

The last words were a wail.

CHAPTER XIV.

AT THE KNIFE'S POINT.

THE shriek that pealed from the Gold Girl's throat as the Seraph's arrow pierced her arm startled the two men whom we left facing each other over the trampled snow—Kiowa Charley and Quartz Dick.

They had stood motionless, but with tigerish eyes, whose glare seemed to devour during the interval between their unexpected meeting and the cry.

Each seemed to recognize it at the same instant.

A moment later a flying figure halted in their sight, and they beheld Staria about to start from the strange tableau presented to her gaze.

"The new girl showed fight!" exclaimed Quartz Dick. "Kiowa, thar's suthin' the matter with the yaller girl!"

The mustang king darted a searching glance at Staria.

"Come up!" he said, in an imperative tone; but she did not move.

"She's too jealous to obey," Dick said, with a broad smile illumining his dark face. "Don't you see you've lost all control over the creature?"

"I never had much," was the low reply.

"More'n I ever had! She'll listen to me. Staria?"

At the sound of her name, the Gold Girl bounded forward, nor paused until she stood almost between the rivals.

"An arrer in her arm!" exclaimed Quartz

Dick. "That's what produced the cry. Who guv ye thet present, girl?"

Kiowa Charley waited with much eagerness for her answer.

"Quartz Dick may ask; but the Gold Girl need not speak."

"Woman ag'in' woman, and ye'r' ashamed to acknowledge the corn," laughed the bully gruffly. "I didn't know that the new girl could handle the bow."

"The new girl did not give Staria the shaft," flashed the jealous girl, with a glance of hatred at Kiowa Charley. "But she got the knife which came down when the bow-string sounded."

"What is that!" and Charley shot toward the speaker. "Did you give Bessie Lincoln the length of your jealous blade? Have you murdered the innocent girl whom I wrenched from the arms of a villain not three hours since? Tell me the truth, Staria—tell it without reserve, or—"

"Tech 'er while I've got the eye-drop on yer, Charley, an' ye'll go but one eye on things over the dark river."

Well might the young mustanger quail before the deadly revolver which, held by a hand that never trembled, looked at him from over the yellow girl's shoulder.

Behind the weapon glared the devilish eyes of Quartz Dick.

"I've got the drop thet is death!" was the continuation. "Don't lay hands on the girl, Kiowa. She hez already said that she gave the new girl the knife; ov course she got the hull length ov it, fer did ye ever know a jealous woman to be satisfied with jest prickin' the skin?"

Kiowa Charley's hand mechanically shrunk from the arrowed arm it was about to touch.

He must have felt at that moment that he was lost. His most inveterate enemy held his life in his lawless hand; his own quickness with the pistol—and he was master of that weapon—would not save him if Quartz Dick really wanted to kill.

His hand went down, but it fell as if by chance upon the butt of his own majestic pistol.

"Charley, the new girl, I guess, hes handed in her checks. We won't hev to fight for her."

"The secret of Quartz Dick's flashing eyes seemed to have been revealed by his last sentence."

"So you wanted her?"

"Yes!"

The girl turned upon the bully.

"Dick want new girl, eh?"

"Sartainly! You've killed my girl, not Kiowa's."

Staria turned bewildered upon the young mustanger.

"Then Charley no hate the Gold Girl? The new sweetheart belong to Dick. Ha! ha! Staria thought she had stolen Kiowa's heart. Now—"

"Stand off! I don't want to touch you, murderess, when your hands are red with the blood of the purest woman that ever trod the soil of this accursed red-skinned village. Poor, mad thing! you were jealous without cause. I never, never loved you. I never told you I did not,

but now I do, and accompany my words with a loathing that should blight you where you stand. I wish that arrow had pierced your heart—no! no! I'll take that back. I want you to live to find your baby brother, even though he gets a sister whose insane passion has reddened her hands with blood. Don't come nigh me—don't I say. I'd rather embrace a mountain cat than you!"

"Great Caesar!" gasped Quartz Dick. "Charley, you don't b'long hyar. Yer place is in the theater. I'll spare yer eye if you promise to go on the stage an' get off such a piece ov actin' as you've just done."

Kiowa Charley's reply was a fierce mad glance at the robust ruffian, whose sarcasm cut him to the heart.

The effect of the mustanger's sentences upon the girl was startling. At his stern "Stand off!" she stopped suddenly, and then listened like a prisoner undergoing sentence to the words that followed.

She trembled while she listened, and more than once seemed on the eve of falling.

Quartz Dick had hardly concluded his remarks before he supplemented them with a loud cry.

"The girl! The girl! by George! She is goin' to fall."

Simultaneous was the leap of the enemies to Staria's assistance; but before a hand touched her she went forward with a wailing cry, and fell with her face pressed against the snow.

The two men almost collided over her prostrate form.

Their hands were on their pistols. The weapons at full cock glittered in the moonlight.

"What do you say, Kiowa?" said Quartz Dick.

"I am ready!"

"Pistols or knives?"

"I am not particular."

"Devilish easy to please. I always knowed thar was grit in yer. Two girls hev went under on our account to-night—more on yours though than mine. We ought to fight over the last one—a girl that loved till it killed her."

Kiowa Charley looked at the faultless figure lying so quiet at his feet.

"Oh, she's dead! Faintin' people don't lie that way."

"Dead!" groaned the young mustanger.

"Dick, I hope you're mistaken. I tore that girl from the Apaches, and got three arrows in the back for doing it. More than one long trail I have traveled to find her brother—a little fellow named Pepito. But I never made love to her. I could not do that. I have been kind to her. There ain't a drop of blood in Kiowa Charley's veins that he would not have given to save her life. Now she's dead, and Pepito, the brother, is still unfound. She has kept me among these Indians for five years. I have another home. My heart is there every day, every hour, but she said, 'Stay, Charley,' and I remained hunting for Pepito—"

"An' ridin' a white mustang o' nights over the plains an' scarin' the grittiest Injuns nigh onto death."

The young mustanger started violently.

"Oh, I know!" was the triumphant sneer. "Listen! I thought I heard the old chief's signal awhile ago. There it goes ag'in. Santanta

is coming back. What would he say war I to tell 'im about the mystery?"

"Go and tell him!" cried Kiowa Charley.

"No! we war talkin' about fightin' a duel. You say you ar' not particular ez to the weep-ins. Will you stan' by my choice?"

"I will!"

The heavy revolver that Quartz Dick had held in his hand some time was thrust suddenly into the broad leathern belt that girded his loins.

The next moment he drew a murderous looking knife.

"Your blade out-measures mine by two inches," Kiowa Charley said holding up his own knife which looked ludicrously diminutive aside of Dick's.

"That's a plaything!" cried the ruffian in derision. "The point wouldn't tech my heart, ef ye druv bilt an' all in. I like a s'archer—a regular life-hunter! Ever kill anything with thet knife?"

"You would be answered in Apache-land!" was the proud reply.

"Ho! ho! an Apache is like a rabbit—you tech 'im an' he's dead. Stand thar a minute. Don't tech the girl—mind thet, Kiowa!"

With this admonition still on his tongue, Quartz Dick bounded away, and disappeared in his own domicile.

A moment later he reappeared carrying in his left hand the exact counterpart of the knife that he gripped with his right.

"This ar' more like it!" he said, extending the weapon just obtained toward Kiowa Charley, who, having returned his own knife to his belt, grasped it with avidity. "Thar's blood on it, but not human blood. I tracked a b'ar in the Wichita last week. It war arter night; we war both swimmin' the river, an' hed a collision, an' ov course a scrimmage. I'm generous, Kiowa—I always was. You've got the better knife. It isn't disgraceful to go under by sech a b'ar-killin' blade. Now we're ready."

Kiowa Charley drew his handsome figure to its full hight and looked into his foe's dark face. He was ready.

"We've got no seconds," said Quartz Dick. "What will we do?"

"How often has Santanta signaled the village?"

"Twice."

"He will shout again. Three times—it is the Kiowa custom, you know. Let his third cry be our signal to begin the fight."

"I'm satisfied. Kiowa, ef the new girl warn't dead, ye'd be minus an eye to-night."

To this the mustang king made no reply.

With the bear knife in his steady hand, he was waiting for the signal to hurl himself against his bitterest foe.

Life and death hung on the seconds that recorded the beating of their hearts.

CHAPTER XV.

THE FEVER LODGES.

LET us return to Old Experiment and Simon Brane, whom we left riding from the Indian village.

The latter had just informed his companion of the deplorable result of his last shots, for Si-

mon had distinctly seen Kit Carson throw up his long arms and fall backward upon the snow.

"Dead at last, an' not Injun slain either!" mentally exclaimed the trailer. "Old Kit's words hev come true—he always said that I would be with him when he went under."

Filled with remorse for the fatal shot, and angered at Simon for not avenging Kit's death, Old Experiment suddenly spurred his horse from the spot where they had halted.

Side by side they rode in silence for many minutes.

"Halt!" suddenly fell from Experiment's lips. "Simon, I've been thinkin' deeper nor I ever thought afore for nigh an hour. I'm goin' back!"

Simon Brane, who had drawn rein, looked—stared into his companion's face.

"Goin' back?" he echoed. "What for?"

"To die where Kit went under, I suspect. I want to call up another class in spellin'!"

Insane fury made the speaker's dark eyes dance.

"Yes, I'm goin' back. Stay thar ef you ar' not."

With the last word Nightwind was wheeled toward the Kiowa village, and a touch of the keen spur sent him off like an arrow in that direction.

"I've see'd 'im mad afore, but never crazy!" muttered Simon Brane, gazing for a moment after the mad scalper, and at the next he was galloping after him.

"This is our last scalp-hunt as true as death!" he went on, as he sped over the snow in his effort to overtake Old Experiment. "Kit hed a dream once up on the Big Cinnamon, and a speerit told 'im that we'd all die in the same place an' nigh about the same time. The dream ar' comin' true. Wal, I'm ready."

At last his horse reached the lithe-limbed steed that bore Old Experiment toward the Kiowa town.

"I'm with ye, Experiment," whispered Simon.

But there was no reply. The mad trailer did not even turn his head; but Simon saw some glistening drops of water on his bronze cheek.

They were for Kit Carson.

For many minutes silence reigned over the two men who went over the gentle rolling lands with great rapidity.

It was not until the brilliant moon showed them the white teepees of the Indians that Old Experiment drew rein.

"Back ag'in!" he said, glancing at Simon. "They're still howlin' over their dead. Long since they hev cut Kit to pieces, an' the little fool, too, I hope. We're Injuns yet, Simon; we must play the game a while longer; mebbe we'll pass in our cheeks with these queer duds on. Ar' ye superstitious?"

"What?"

"Do you believe what the Injuns do about the fever lodges?"

"Ef I did I'd go down thar an' tell 'em thet I war Simon Brane. I'm not afeard ov the fever."

Old Experiment did not reply; but slid from his horse, and began to remove the bridle; and

Simon, without questioning him, followed his example.

"My plan is this," said Experiment, coming up to Simon with the bridle in his hand. "We'll take up our quarters in one ov the fever lodges; we'll call it Death's Hotel, fur this is what we'll make it fur Kit Carson's sake. You know an' I know, thet an Injun wouldn't tech one o' them lodges fur the hull world. They're full ov the bones ov red-skins what war cut off by the fever—they're kind ov graves. From what Quartz Dick said afore Rocky Mountain Kit introduced himself so sudden like, thar's an Injun in one ov them with a bullet in his eye. We'll be safe in the fever lodge. Santanta himself, brave as the old chief is, would sooner lose his breathin' machinery than look inside o' them. Do you fully understan' me, Simon? Ev'ry night death will walk through that rascally Injun town; he may take his first promenade to-night. I want to build Kit Carson a monument ov Kiowa bones. How does that proposition striko ye, Simon?"

Simon Brane merely held out his hand, and the terrible compact of the leaderless avengers was sealed.

The faithful steeds, dismissed to wander over the limitless plain, or to join the mustangs in the corral, the two men went forward and entered the Indian town.

The fever lodges, three in number, were the last ones in the line of wigwams that stretched to the north. A space of sixty feet separated them from the nearest inhabited wigwam. As Old Experiment had told Simon, they were stern reminders of the terrible fever scourge which, several years prior to the date of our romance, devastated the Indian lands south of the Arkansas.

The Kiowas had suffered not less than their red neighbors. At Santanta's command, the three lodges, large and commodious, became the hospitals for the village. The stricken chiefs were carried there, and there, one by one, they died. Not a body was removed, and the winds of the changing seasons whistling through the crevices of the dreaded charnel-house, dried the once strong arms, and shriveled the giant figures of the sachems.

No Indian would touch these strange sarcophagi of their chiefs. The three fever lodges were given a wide berth, especially after sunset, and they were, therefore, the last place in which they would hunt for a foe.

Old Experiment and Simon Brane, the former in the lead, entered the village at a point a few rods south of these death receptacles. The wails of the Kiowas over the braves shot by the old scalper still filled the air.

As yet, Staria had not sought Bessie Lincoln with the Knife, and Kiowa Charley and Quartz Dick had not met for the duel.

The lodges reached, Old Experiment lifted the skins, untouched since the last chief had been borne in to die, and the twain entered.

Darkness enveloped them, but Simon's hands soon told them the nature of their abode.

"Death's Hotel ar' full ov guests," he said. "Experiment, this ar' the place fur ghosts."

"Injuns don't come back," came the reply through the gloom. "What ar' ye huntin', Simon?"

"I'm countin' heads. The chiefs ar' dried up; they'd go up in a good wharlwind."

Despite his nerve, Old Experiment shuddered. To be shut up in a lodge inhabited by dead men was a situation not to his liking.

He heard his comrade inspecting the forbidding premises with his hands.

"He'll amuse himself till I come back," he muttered, and the next instant he glided out.

Simon Brane did "amuse" himself.

Confident that Old Experiment was standing at the opening, he was fearlessly examining the bodies of the fever-slain chiefs; nor was he called from his work until he heard his name fall from his companion's tongue.

"Simon, whar ar' ye?"

"Hyar!"

"Hold out yer hand. I want to put suthin' in it."

With not a little curiosity, Simon extended the hand; but the next moment as his long fingers closed on a good quantity of coarse hair he sprung back, with an exclamation of genuine horror.

"What on airth—"

"Scalps! four ov 'em!"

"Fresh?"

"Feel 'em!"

The next instant Simon Brane's left hand was bloody!

"Great Jehosaphat!" he gasped. "Whar did you git 'em?"

"Whar they growed. I more'n half-suspected thet death would take a walk afore mornin'. This is but a beginnin'. I've got two bits ov news; first, Santanta's comin' back; I jist heard his first yell; second, thar's a livin' bein' in the next fever lodge."

"A livin' bein'?" echoed Simon. "Who kin it be?"

"Thet's what we don't know; but we must. Somebody hidin' from the Injuns fur a purpose, like ourselves, probably."

Simon grasped Old Experiment's shoulder.

"Mebbe"—he was excited—"mebbe it's Kit!"

"Kit Carson? No! I know whar he is. I shot ten times and hit ten bodies. I didn't give any two the same ball. Rocky Mountain Kit is dead, an' I'm the brute thet killed 'im!"

"But the livin' man in the fever lodge?"

"Yes! yes! the question is, who is he?"

CHAPTER XVI.

DEATH ON HORSEBACK.

FACE to face with knives ready for the deadly onslaught stood Quartz Dick and Kiowa Charley, waiting for the third and last cry from the returning band.

They knew that unless something startling occurred to interrupt, it would certainly ring from Santanta's throat.

But it did not reply to the responsive cries that soared above the Indian village.

"It is a long time coming!" thought Kiowa Charley.

"Something has occurred!" said the bully to himself.

The mien of the young man before him surprised Quartz Dick.

With his handsome figure drawn to its full hight, Kiowa Charley presented a fearless front to the eye-shooter. Not a tremor passed over his shapely limbs; his eye did not quail before the tigerish orbs of the ruffian.

"Suthin's happened to keep the signal back!" suddenly broke forth Quartz Dick, who could not stand the strain imposed by the momentous silence.

"Wait!" was the response. "It will come. Santanta breaks no custom of his race."

"Wait—till daylight? I'm not one of the waitin' kind."

"Then let us get to work."

"See hyar, Kiowa. You're not actually spi'll-in' for a fight; neither am I. We oughtn't to make tigers ov ourselves. I don't want your blood. Do you want mine?"

Charley looked like a person who was puzzled to reply to a question. He thought he detected a subtle meaning in Quartz Dick's words. Was the bully really afraid of him?

Suspecting treachery, he still held up the knife bloody with the life-current of Dick's last grizzly.

"I don't want your blood," said the bully. "Kiowa, I could kill you. For I've got the lunge in me, an' you couldn't avoid it. But I don't want yer life. I war jest tryin' yer grit; you've got enough to carry ye through the world. Cuss the signal we've been waitin' fur! I give ye the life I've held in my hands fur the last half-hour."

Back into Quartz Dick's belt dropped the unstained knife with his last word.

"I don't thank you," was the mustanger's answer. "Quartz Dick, you thought I would not fight you. I always said to myself that, whenever you faced me, you would find me ready to fight you to the death. I knew you were bound to discover, sooner or later, that I was the cyclops of the plains. Now you sneak out of the fight you brought about. Is this your vaunted bravery, coward?"

The epithet sent Quartz Dick's hand to his knife.

"No! not to-night, Kiowa. You can't force me into a fight. Keep the b'ar-knife; you'll need it mebbe when we meet ag'in."

The next moment Kiowa Charley found himself alone smiling at the ludicrous termination of his duel. Quartz Dick, with his back turned upon him, was deliberately walking away.

What was the bully saying to himself?

"Thar's more grit in the boy than I thought. Ef the new gal warn't dead, I'd 'a' dropped 'im with the pistol; but when I said 'Knives,' I hit him right. He's carved afore; ef old Santanta had yelled, I'd hev hed 'im on me like a catamount, an' the b'ar knife would hev cut his initials on my heart. But wait, Kiowa! Tomorrer Santanta will see the mystery of the plains: I'll hev the pleasure of superintendin' the interduction."

Kiowa Charley heard none of this.

He had raised Staria from the snow, and was looking into her cold expressionless face.

"The girl loves me," he murmured. "I have raised her hopes to heaven, I have also dashed them down the hights of perdition. She would die for me. The love of this girl is fixed; it is

certain. She lives but there is blood on her hands—the blood of pretty Bessie Lincoln."

He made a move as if he would discard the lifeless body as he thought of the work of the jealous knife; but something—the unclosing of the soft eyelids—drew his attention toward it.

"Staria?" he said.

"Charley! The new girl—"

"I know it all; you told me before you fell."

"But my knife did not kill. No! it could not, for Pepito's arrow broke my blow. I saw the new girl fall; but she cannot be dead."

"Thank Heaven! I wouldn't have a life on your hands, girl, for all the loves in the world."

The beautiful arms of the Gold Girl went round the young mustanger's neck.

In the kiss that Kiowa Charley imprinted upon the upturned brow there seemed to be a love that would last forever.

A moment later the twain were hurrying away, the strong arm of the mustanger supporting the girl.

When they paused it was before a lodge whose curtains were partially separated.

Eagerly Kiowa Charley bounded into the structure.

"Bessie?" he called. "Or, if you will pardon me, Miss Lincoln—"

The sound of his voice in the wigwam made him break his sentence.

"Great heavens! she is not here," he gasped.

"The new girl gone?" exclaimed a voice at his side. "Did not the white Kiowa come this way?"

Kiowa Charley turned upon the yellow girl.

"By my soul, he did!" he cried. "He has been here—the tiger! He must have held a doubt of your success with the knife, which accounts for his cowardice. Bessie Lincoln has fallen into his hands. Look here! do you not see those boot-marks in the snow? They betray the thief, and the hyena at the same time. Ten minutes have not elapsed since we parted. If he has left the village, I know what horse he took. Come! I will prove it!"

Kiowa Charley sprung down the Indian street. His right hand clutching Staria's wrist, he almost dragged her after him.

A few bounds brought him to the stable.

Tearing open the door he called:

"Midnight? Morning?"

A double whinny greeted his words, and two equine heads appeared at the opening.

Their appearance nonplused the mustanger, and he stared into Staria's face.

"Horses here! Where now are Dick and the new girl?"

"Somewhere in the village! But we will find them. He will not take her to his hovel because he knows I would find her there. Come, girl. No! let me first attend to your wound. What have I been thinking about to leave that arrow in your arm?"

"Arrow not hurt now. It came from Pepito, and it saved the life of the new girl!"

There was a smile on the Gold Girl's face as she extended her arm to Kiowa Charley. The shaft had gone clean through it, piercing the flesh only.

As if used to such wounds, after a brief ex-

amination the mustanger broke the barb at the point, and then dexterously withdrew it.

"There was no poison on it, thank fortune!" he said, fervently. "Now go to your lodge and bathe the wound. I will hunt the Kiowa tiger."

"Wound not sore. Staria will go with Charley."

"Jealous yet," thought the mustanger. "Then, come on."

Their course took them toward the northern portion of the village, and in a few moments they stood near the fever lodges.

As they reached a certain spot a yell, loud and clear, fell upon their ears.

"The third cry at last!" said Kiowa Charley. "Santanta is home once more."

Retreating into the shadow of one of the charnel-houses already described, he drew Staria after him, and then looked at the cavalcade now dimly visible. It was a band of fifty Indians headed by the great chief Santanta. They were gaudily attired, for a visit to the Southern forts of the Government had resulted in a lavish distribution of presents so delightful to the young warrior's eye.

"Look!" suddenly cried Staria, clutching Kiowa Charley's arm as she pointed at the van of the troop. "Who rides at old Santana's side? Does not my brother know him?"

"It is he, by Jove! the thief—the tiger!"

In a moment the man whose knee touched the Kiowa king's was recognized by his young foe.

Already, perhaps, Quartz Dick had told to Santanta the secret of the cyclopean rider.

Kiowa Charley's pistol flashed in the starlight. It went upward like a rocket, and covered the white ruffian.

But at that moment a rough voice which he had heard before arrested his finger, already on the trigger.

"First class in spellin', stand up! Spell de'th an' destruction!"

Then bang! bang! bang! bang! The bullets whistled over Kiowa Charley's head—and the foremost saddles—including Santanta's and Quartz Dick's, were emptied in a flash.

Horried and speechless, the mustanger turned.

Not ten rods away, two gaunt figures were seated upon the backs of statue-like horses, and it was from the huge revolvers in their outstretched hands that the death shots came.

CHAPTER XVII.

WHICH ENDS OUR STORY.

BEFORE witnessing the entire result of the deadly shots unexpectedly poured into Santanta's band let us return to Old Experiment and Simon Brane whom we left in the fever lodge, discussing the identity of the tenant of the wigwam adjoining theirs.

Old Experiment, while returning from his successful scalp foray, had made the discovery. It was by no means a pleasant one. They had hoped to find the fever lodges untenanted except by the dead; but one at least contained a living person—a mystery, as it were.

The old scalpers could not solve the riddle.

Simon suggested that it might be the Seraph;

but Old Experiment declared that he had seen that individual gliding through a distant part of the village, therefore, he could not be the occupant of the fever lodge.

"I'll reckonoiter ag'in," said Experiment. "Keep a close fist on the scalps, Simon."

The old trailer went out; but five minutes did not elapse between his departure and return.

"What's up?" queried Simon starting forward.

"Them hosses beat wolves for trackin'!" was the answer. "They're trackin' us to this spot."

"No!" exclaimed Simon incredulously.

"Come out an' see."

The twain glided into the starlight.

"Look yonder!" cried Old Experiment pointing to two horses not far off.

Simon sprung forward. Sure enough; the animals were their own steeds!

"They'll betray us!" he said looking into his companion's puzzled countenance.

"They must not!" was the reply. "We can't drive 'em away; we've got to ride 'em off."

"Then let's be quick about it."

Simon vaulted upon the back of his horse; his example was followed by his companion.

"Hark! thar goes the last yell. Santanta's back. He's blocked our way up; we can't get out upon the plains till he passes with his accursed Injuns."

The two men seated on their horses in the shadow of the fever lodge understood the import of that yell.

Old Experiment drew his revolvers.

"He's gettin' mad ag'in," said Simon to himself; but while he spoke the old trailer took out his own weapons.

They saw Santanta and his band approach; Simon watched Old Experiment as much as the motley cavalcade.

All at once the thunderous tones of his comrade rung through and through him.

"First class in spellin' stan' up!"

Then Old Experiment began firing with a rapidity that dazed Simon. Unwittingly he caught the infection, and his pistols went up and flashed their death fire into the faces of the Indians.

We have said that saddles were emptied in quick succession. If the shots were rash ones they were at least deadly in execution.

Confusion took possession of the band thus villainously attacked. Kiowa Charley and the Gold Girl could only stare at the men who shot with such precision and rapidity.

Before that cruel fusilade even the fearless Indian of the plains could not stand.

Santanta's heroes broke and fled.

The chief himself, having fallen from his saddle at the first shot, managed to cling to the long mane of his steed, and was carried far beyond the village to the wind-swept plains of the south.

Quartz Dick, struck through the shoulder, by a bullet intended for his heart, was dashed to the ground; but sprung quickly upon his feet.

"The shootin' devil hes come back!" he growled, extricating himself unharmed, save by the bullet, from among the excited horses.

"He aimed too high this time; I usually carry

my heart below my shoulder. Thunder an' guns! they're shootin' yet; keepin' on like clock-work."

The bully sprung toward one of the fever lodges.

"The girl will not object to me hidin' with her till the scrimmage is over," he said. "Her hands ar' soft, an' she shall dress the shoulder ov her future husband."

Quartz Dick parted the curtains as he spoke.

"Bessie, my child, does the fightin' outside frighten you? In all my life—"

The ruffian did not pause of his own accord. A hand on his throat broke his sentence.

"The gal needn't be scared while I'm about!" was hissed in his ear. "I ought to thank you, Dick, fur bringing her right to me. Didn't know I war hyar, eh?"

Quartz Dick did not reply, but the voice and the hand at his throat told him who his con-fronter was.

Kit Carson!

"Fever lodges make good homes sometimes," continued the voice. "Old Experiment shot poorly for once, an' I got one of his balls. His heart didn't send that bullet on its mission. I know that. Thank fortune my Injun head-gear turned the lead aside and I got hyar by strategy—hyar to this old fever lodge. An' when you put the gal in hyar, Dick, bless my old soul! of you didn't lay her in old Kit Carson's arms. But the shootin'—what did it amount to?"

"Santanta's killed, and the Injuns scattered like sheep." Dick's trachea was partially released. "I never saw sech firin'!"

"The spellin' class didn't stan' up long, eh, Dick?" laughed Carson. "We'll go out an' see it."

The bully of Kiowa land was at the mercy of the man who held him.

Rocky Mountain Kit dragged him into the starlight.

"Kit Carson, by my life!" exclaimed a rough voice.

"Whar?"

"Yonder! look! he's holdin' Quartz Dick, the skunk! Caught 'im somewhar."

Two men leaped from their horses and ran forward.

"Old Kit! by the jumpin' jingo!" cried Old Experiment. "I'm ready to pass in my dilapidated checks fur my hands don't carry his blood on 'em. The great Injun eddicator ar' now ready—"

"No speeches hyar!" was the stern interruption. "We are still in the jaws ov death. Bessie Lincoln is safe. This man brought her unintentionally to me. Quartz Dick, our old enemy, has helped us. I hold him fast. Boys, he's before you for sentence. Quick!"

Old Experiment and Simon Brane exchanged glances. There was mercy in the eyes of the latter, but none in his companion's.

"Give him to me!" cried a voice.

Every listener turned upon the speaker.

Kiowa Charley stood before the group.

"He would not fight me awhile ago. He will now."

"I will!" flashed Quartz Dick. "I'll give 'im a chance to wield the b'ar-knife!"

Kit Carson's hand fell from the bully's throat,

and whipping out his knife he sprung before his young rival.

"It isn't our fight," Kit said. "Tiger ag'in tiger—that's what it is. Come, we must git out of this."

Bounding back into the fever lodge, Kit Carson disappeared for a moment; then his friends heard him calling them from the other side.

Hastening to his side they beheld him standing beside a fair white girl. A knife glittered in his hand; he had cut his way through the wigwam.

The retreat from the village was precipitate but orderly.

Once more Kit Carson bestrode Santa Anna, and the lithe-limbed mustang which they took from the corral bore Bessie Lincoln swiftly from the scenes of danger.

"Once more on the plains! Now I would like to meet that one-eyed sphinx who rides the white horse. We're not far from the spot where I first encountered him."

It was Kit Carson who spoke.

Old Experiment and Simon Brane exchanged significant glances.

"Mebbe we'll see 'im yet," said the former.

The November sun, by no means cold, was melting the snow that covered the plains. Its surface was glistening like a sheet of pearls.

A party of four—three men and a fair young girl—mounted on horses, were looking at a little cavalcade that was rapidly approaching.

All at once one of the men turned upon the person who sat beside the girl.

"I kin tell ye which ov 'em come out o' the fight best," he said. "Kiowa Charley!"

The girl started at the mention of the name, and her cheeks betrayed the beating of her heart.

"Is he comin'?"

"Yes; an' the Seraph, too."

"The Seraph!" echoed Kit Carson.

"What! has the boy remained behind us? You said he left the village on the hunt of me!"

"So he did, jest afore our last tussle; but he must hev come back. Now you kin see fur yer-self, Kit."

"I see! I see!" exclaimed the old pathfinder.

A few minutes later the parties met on the boundless plain. Kiowa Charley, Pepito and Staria sat before Kit Carson and his band.

"Thar's the mystery!" said Old Experiment, pointing to the young mustanger who smiled in acknowledgment. "He's got two eyes now, like all who don't wear Quartz Dick's mark."

Kiowa Charley rode up to Carson.

"We were friends once," he said.

"Friends yet!" was the answer, and their hands met. "Whar's Quartz Dick?"

"Where his bear-knife left him—dead on the snow."

"I knowed it!" broke in Old Experiment. "I hed confidence in ye, boy."

When the sun went down a party of seven rode northward. Bessie Lincoln had a new companion, Kiowa Charley.

"The boy, Pepito, believes it at last," he said to the major's daughter. "It is a strange romance. Long ago Staria lost a brother, the boy

a sister. Until yesterday they thought they were brother and sister. Pepito's wonderful memory proved it otherwise. There were marks on his sister's shoulders; there were none on Staria's. Since the young folks have discovered this, a new and eminently proper attachment has sprung up between them. There are many romances in real life. Look at the young couple now."

Bessie Lincoln glanced at the Gold Girl and Pepito riding side by side, and then, with a smile and blush, turned to her escort.

"I see," she said, gently. "How could it be otherwise?"

Reader, there has been but little love-making in the course of our exciting story. Let us say that Cupid was kept busy during the ride to Fort Sill where Bessie Lincoln found a father's arms once more thrown about her. The girl's return was most unexpected, as a force had been sent out on the trail of the captured wagon.

Somehow or other our friends had missed the blue-coated trailers who returned several days later, of course without Bessie.

Kiowa Charley explained the cause of the Indian's non-pursuit. Santanta was missing after the fight, and the whole village turned out to find the king of the Kiowas. He was found at last, nearer death than life, but not until it was too late to pursue the workers of the mischief.

In Fort Sill Kit Carson said that he had had his last scalp-hunt, which was true; for a few months later—after witnessing the betrothal of the Seraph, his protegee and the beautiful Gold Girl—the old guide stepped upon the last long trail which was a path of rest.

As for Old Experiment and Simon Brane, they are still together on the frontier in the service of the Government; and more than once since their last exciting night in Kiowa land the Indian has heard the voice of the "great eddicator" ordering the "first class in spellin'" to "stan' up."

Here, reader, the pen, its work for the present done, falls from our hands, as we learn that Charles Montgomery (Kiowa Charley, if you please) and his lovely little wife are visiting Major Lincoln at old Fort Sill.

Thus, in a new role, the Mystery reappears.

THE END.

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